

MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE
SOCIALLY ENGAGED, COLLABORATIVE PUBLIC ART IN
THE CITY

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Abstract

The current climate surrounding contemporary art production—including recent curatorial and exhibition practices—is especially marked by an ongoing expansion of the field across disciplinary boundaries and beyond the conventional spaces of display and reception. This expanding field of artistic production spreads in multiple directions, an expanding universe without any definite center or edge. In addition, there is a considerable amount of contemporary art production today that has shifted away from notions of objecthood, wherein artists take the very nature of human relations itself as the source material for the undertaking of a project or research initiative, developing works that are very much defined by their processes of coming-into-being and points of reception. Concomitantly, in recent years there have been a number of exhibitions predicated on the idea of the city as an integral protagonist in the exhibition process, in which artists are invited to develop projects in dialogue with the inhabitants, spaces, cultural milieu, etc., of the host city.

Focusing on the notions of collaboration, improvisation, representation, and community, this analysis seeks to scrutinize and question such practices in their layering of both sociopolitical and aesthetic qualities. An analysis of two recent exhibitions: *ciudadMULTIPLEcity*, Panama City, Panama; and the 9th International Istanbul Biennial, Istanbul, Turkey—along with select examples of socially engaged, collaborative public art projects within—will explore the multivalent and ultimately contingent nature of such practices. By making the invisible visible (i.e. social tensions, power dynamics, marginalized groups of individuals), these projects create situations that embody what French

philosophers Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have termed “radical democracy” through the activation of an “agonistic public sphere.”

Yet, important questions remain: How does one evaluate the success or failure of these works? What is the actual value of such practices, both immediately and in the long-term? For whom are these works valuable? And what are the stakes and claims at the core of these projects? In order to address these questions, I have developed a set of criteria for the evaluation of these types of projects by engaging in the contemporary discourse surrounding socially engaged, collaborative public art practices. The main criteria points include: the relationship between the aesthetic qualities and the sociopolitical mode of address (as I have already mentioned); the issue of ethics; the relationship between artistic autonomy and collaborative modes of production; and finally the point of reception and afterlife of the various projects.

Introduction

The current climate surrounding contemporary art production—including recent curatorial and exhibition practices—is especially marked by an ongoing expansion of the field across disciplinary boundaries and beyond the conventional spaces of display and reception. This expanding field of artistic production¹ spreads in multiple directions; an expanding universe without any definite center or edge, the field of art both creates and permeates the spaces of our lives, and of our thoughts. This ultimately generative process further eludes the art historical desire to name, label and define by way of its ability to adapt and transform. Much of artistic production today is not predicated on notions of objecthood, but rather on investigating the relationships between art and (global) society, with particular attention to the implicit relations of everyday life. Currently, there is a great deal of contemporary art production that takes the very nature of human relations as the source material for the undertaking of a project or research initiative. In doing so, artistic processes are combined with social processes of transformation through the “making visible” of that which is

¹ The concept of an “expanded field” with regard to the visual arts is here adapted from the writing of Rosalind Krauss and Kate Fowle. In her seminal essay “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” Krauss asserts the need to reevaluate the notion of sculpture, or what is characterized as sculptural, in light of the proliferation of certain artistic trends (i.e. Minimalism, Performance and Land Art, Installation, etc.) in the 60’s and 70’s that sought to question and complicate the boundaries of such practices. More recently, Kate Fowle has adapted this concept in order to frame her analysis of contemporary curatorial practices in her essay “Who Cares? Understanding the Role of the Curator Today.” In observation of the myriad of roles that the curator of contemporary art today performs, Fowle uses the notion of an “expanded field of curating” to relate the different practices that are (problematically) lumped together as a seemingly singular practice. In both instances there is an urgent need to reconsider art historical categorizations that have become increasingly outmoded. In order to avoid the flattening out of art historical categories, the authors focus primarily on ideas of difference and distinction, thereby revealing the ongoing diversification within the field in question rather than subscribing to predetermined modes of analysis. With regard to the argument here, I have also found it exceedingly important to investigate the different and distinct ways that socially engaged, collaborative public art manifests. Rosalind Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” in *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 30-44. Kate Fowle, “Who Cares? Understanding the Role of the Curator Today,” in *Cautionary Tales: Critical Curating*, ed. Steven Rand and Heather Kouris (New York: apexart, 2007), 26-35.

otherwise invisible: the very socio-politico-economic tensions and power relations that organize societal life, as well as the “invisible” people within society, the marginalized and/or disenfranchised.

Within current art historical and critical writing these practices have been garnished with a variety of qualifying designations: “socially engaged art, community-based art, experimental communities, dialogic art, littoral art, participatory, interventionist, research-based, or collaborative art.”² Each of these designations reveals a theoretical inclination, the will of the author to present specific artists, works of art, exhibitions, curatorial methodologies, and communities of people within a carefully circumscribed frame of meaning and signification. Inevitably, all such analytical projects are incomplete, but this is not to be disparaged. Quite the contrary: just as many of these projects are designed as open-ended systems of collaboration, so too should the analysis hinge on the contingencies of specific situations and interactions. It is important to keep in mind that the inscription of a set of practices is always an act of exclusion as well. Furthermore, so as not to confuse the creative process of the writer with that of the practitioners in question, it is of the utmost importance to identify and make transparent the criteria for the evaluation of the different projects alongside some sense of the historical trajectory of the discourse that both informs and is informed by socially engaged, collaborative public art practices.

The first chapter of this text begins at this point, sifting through the different voices and positions prevalent in the contemporary discourse in order to identify and develop a coherent set of criteria for the evaluation of these types of projects. For this is one of the

² Claire Bishop, “The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents,” *Artforum* 44, No. 6 (Feb. 2006): 179.

primary obstacles facing artists, curators, art historians and critics who have taken deep interest in this highly porous field of study: the very mutability of these practices does much to dissuade the use of oversimplified categories and concepts, and without sufficient tools (theoretical or practical) to measure and gage their multiple values and points of reception, analysis can often lead to a reduction of the works to a single dimension or more narrowly defined critical frame. As will be shown throughout the course of this essay, many of these projects of socially engaged, collaborative art are highly complex systems that entangle both aesthetic and socio-politico-economic issues. These kinds of practices often speak to diverse groupings of people, who—while deeply interconnected—may or may not have access to the necessary socially, culturally or politically viable opportunities for the formulation of their own forms of expression. This often introduces a desire to be ethically stringent when dealing with such situations, and while this is surely well intended, the subscription to an ethical value system as criterion for the analysis of these types of projects should be scrutinized as well and not simply taken at face value.

At the core of these practices I have come to identify a number of key concepts that are central to my analyses of the case studies that make up the other chapters of this text. The two most significant of these are the concepts of collaboration and representation, both of which are much overused within current art historical and critical discourses, which often does more to diminish their significance as a result of their uncritical application without the necessary qualifications. My interest in collaborative processes extends far beyond merely the definition of two or more people “working together.” This is a rather mundane interpretation and does not convey the sense of reciprocal activation—processes that create a sense of agency and empowerment among the participants that they may not otherwise put

into practice—that is fundamental to collaboration. The exhibitions, and works of art within, develop situations for the expression of multiple subject positions, and it is through these kinds of exchanges that the possibility for change is enacted, with careful attention paid to the aesthetic potential of the communicative act. Above all, these projects come to function as critical sites of debate and contestation, a form of productive interaction that invariably metabolizes the different viewpoints of those involved in order to produce other viewpoints to be mulled over and debated. Such processes are ultimately dialectical in nature, productive in their sustained oppositionality and interconnectedness.

The different subject positions encounter one another and catalyze (re)vision through such interactions as a result of their proximities, both physically and intellectually. It is no wonder then that many of these projects have been hailed for their democratic nature, through the visualization and vocalization of the *polis*, but I would take this idea even further. These projects are not merely embodiments of democratic ideals, but are part of a larger project identified by French philosophers Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe as “radical democracy.”³ This is not the complacent form of democratic participation that largely defines many political systems today, but the creation of an “agonistic public sphere.”⁴ At this point, the notion of representation within the arts becomes infused with a sense of political representation. Debate and contestation are the cornerstones of a healthy political sphere, and I hold the same for works of art that attempt to address issues that also blend into the realms of the social sciences and beyond. This extends their potential value far

³ Barbara Steiner, “Radical Democracy, Acknowledging the Complexities and Contingencies,” SUPERFLEX, <http://www.superflex.net/text/articles/acknowledging.shtml>.

⁴ Minna Henriksson, “The World Can Be Transformed by Action,” 9th International Istanbul Biennial, <http://www.iksv.org/bienal/bienal9/english/?Page=Curators&Sub=Interview&Content=4>.

beyond the rectification of some perceived societal ailment. Socially engaged, collaborative public art projects, in my opinion, should not be subjugated to some ameliorative function or criterion, as this would greatly reduce the complex nature of such practices and the issues that are their raw materials. While many of these projects most certainly contain some ideological bent (which is unavoidable, a facet of authorship), there is also a concerted effort to represent the true, multivalent nature of such issues. Art, after all, is more concerned with raising questions than providing concrete answers.

To further explore these issues, which are by nature contingent upon the particular nuances of their development and implementation (especially as this relates to their physical and conceptual contexts) I have selected two recent exhibitions for analysis. The exhibitions in question are: *ciudadMULTIPLEcity*, Panama City, Panama, 2003; and the 9th International Istanbul Biennial, Istanbul, Turkey, 2005. The thread of interest that is woven through these case studies concerns the notion of context at multiple scales, with regard to both the individual projects and the overall exhibitions. As such, it will be important to investigate the different notions of context formulated within each exhibition, as well as among the exhibitions. Like concentric circles, the context of the city engulfs the context of each project. But what, exactly, is the relationship between these micro and macro contexts? From the perspective of the individual projects, each draws “upon the complex discourse of the relationship between artist and place, re-imagining place as a situation, a set of circumstances, geographical location, historical narrative, group of people or social agenda.”⁵ Zooming further out, one must then consider how these “situations” relate to what British

⁵ Claire Doherty, “The New Situationists,” in *Contemporary Art: From Studio to Situations* (London: Black Dog Publishing Ltd., 2004), 8.

author and urban theorist Jonathan Raban has termed the “soft city”—“a city made from a complex network of human relationships and individual experiences, a city built around the physical and psychological terrains mapped out by its inhabitants.”⁶

The analysis of each case study will involve an investigation into the interactivity between the exhibition as a whole and the urban environment in which it is situated; an analysis of the curatorial methodology and organization as a guiding force of the exhibition (including the curatorial role played in the development of artistic projects); and the relationship between the artists, their projects and the various constituencies that they attempt to engage. Therefore, in the case of *ciudadMULTIPLEcity*, I will begin with a description of Panama City as the exhibition platform or stage for the developments of the various projects, and assess the methodologies employed by co-curators Gerardo Mosquera and Adrienne Samos prior to and over the course of the exhibition. Focusing in with greater detail, I will then investigate two projects from the exhibition: *Nine* (2003), a two-channel video by Panamanian artist Brooke Alfaro developed in and projected upon housing projects in the neighborhood of Barraza in collaboration with local rival gang members; and a series of sculptural installations by Spanish artist Jesús Palomino entitled *Vendors and Squatters* (2003) dispersed throughout the city.

In similar fashion, an analysis of the 9th International Istanbul Biennial will begin with some characterization of the city of Istanbul, Turkey, which has hosted 10 editions of the Biennial to date. For the 9th installation of the exhibition, co-curators Vasif Kortun and Charles Esche were selected to steer the ship. As a result of the curatorial decision to

⁶ Claire Doherty, “Location, Location: The Biennale and the City,” *Art Monthly* 281 (Nov. 2004): 9.

physically displace certain key elements and projects outside of Istanbul proper, I selected one project from “Istanbul” and one project from “Not-Istanbul.” Austrian artist Karl-Heinz Klopff developed a project entitled *Mind the Steps* (2005) that utilized the rambunctious and disjointed staircases of the Beyoglu district, at night inviting different members of the community to perform on specially selected and illuminated points along the pathways. The Danish artist collective SUPERFLEX, with fellow Danish artist Jens Haaning, displaced their biennial project to their hometown of Copenhagen by shipping 1000 official biennial posters to that northern city and posting them in various sections of the city so as to resonate with certain racial undertones and/or socioeconomic tensions that color the everyday lives of the inhabitants there.

Rather than revealing a kind of categorical identity or formula for socially engaged, collaborative public art practices, these case studies will make visible the *variety* of practices that fall under such a rubric, all the while underlining the contingent nature of each project’s development, implementation and reception. As primarily ephemeral and performative works of art, these projects are difficult to pin down and define with any sense of utter confidence. One of the main issues that continues to plague this realm of activity is the lack of certainty as to their actual social value and lasting effects upon those they engage or who are affected through indirect processes of transformation as these projects permeate the neighborhoods, districts, cities and the world beyond. It is my hope that through a close reading of the discourse around this subject matter and through intimate engagements with a number of key curators, artists and works of art that some of these questions will be illuminated in the following pages.

Tracing the Multiple Lines of Inquiry

Despite the tendency for art historical categorizations to essentialize artistic trends and practices over time, the history of site-specificity and socially engaged, collaborative art is both extensive and widely varied. In the development of the present discourse on the subject, many writers have found precedence in the ideological shadings and event-like projects of early to mid-20th century avant-garde groups. Movements like Dada, the Futurists and the Surrealists were very much interested in breaking down the traditional boundaries between art and life, always seeking to disrupt the complacency of modern bourgeois life through the (at times) shocking reinterpretation of artistic and social spheres.⁷ Of import here is the way in which these practitioners sought to disrupt and agitate the societies and publics in which they circulated. This is a crucial point of focus in my own research, and it is something that I will return to time and time again. However, while there are correlations between these past artistic agendas and more recent reincarnations, the evolution of these practices is anything but linear. Close analysis reveals how the continual reformulation of fundamental concepts and the terms of engagement today are quite distinct from these earlier points of reference.

Towards this end, the recently published text *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, by art historian and critic Miwon Kwon, is a much-needed critical addition to this discourse. Rather than rooting through the more historically distant

⁷ Claire Bishop takes cause with Grant Kester's criticism of the historical avant-garde on the basis of this "shock" value. Kester is critical of the supposed authority of the avant-garde artist who has the insight that others apparently do not and forces this position onto others in order to shake them from the normalcy of daily life. Bishop, in turn, suggests "such discomfort and frustration—along with absurdity, eccentricity, doubt, or sheer pleasure—can, on the contrary, be crucial elements of a work's aesthetic impact and are essential to gaining new perspectives on our condition." Claire Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents," *Artforum* 44, No. 6 (Feb. 2006): 181.

artistic precedents, Kwon focuses her research and analyses upon recent trends within the past 50 years or so. Of particular interest is her development of a genealogy with regard to these types of practices, a process over the course of which the notions of difference and subversion emerge as critical foci. Kwon begins her genealogical history in the 1960s, a period of artistic activity in which site-specific works of art emphasized “a phenomenological or experiential understanding of the site,”⁸ as informed by artistic movements such as Minimalism, Happenings, Installation and Land Art (among others). This interest in phenomenology is largely the influence of the theories of French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose texts were first translated into English during this time.⁹ Thus, Kwon describes how:

site-specific art initially took the site as an actual location, a tangible reality, its identity composed of a unique combination of physical elements: length, depth, height, texture, and shape of walls and rooms; scale and proportion of plazas, buildings, or parks; existing conditions of lighting, ventilation, traffic patterns; distinctive topographical features, and so forth.¹⁰

The site or context at play in these veins of site-specificity focused primarily on physical attributes and the relationship between the viewer’s own physicality and that of the site. The viewer’s body and sensorial faculties became important considerations in the development of the work, which inevitably entailed a kind of “measuring” of the relationships between location, artwork, and viewer.

⁸ Miwon Kwon, introduction to *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Boston: MIT Press, 2002), 3.

⁹ Robert Hobbs, “Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology and Installation Art,” in *Installations: Mattress Factory, 1990-1999* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), 18.

¹⁰ Miwon Kwon, “Genealogy of Site Specificity,” in *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Boston: MIT Press, 2002), 11.

At roughly the same time, the artistic genre of institutional critique also emerged. While the label of “institutional critique” was applied much later, and has subsequently had a number of reformulations over the years,¹¹ many of the artists working in this vein shared an interest in the contextualization of art beyond its physical relationships, insisting “on the social matrix of the class, race, gender, and sexuality of the viewing subject,” and how such attributes relate to the “*cultural* framework [as] defined by the institutions of art.”¹² In works by artists like Michael Asher, Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke, Robert Smithson, and Marcel Broodthaers (to name but a few), the interest in the siting of the work of art took on cultural and socio-politico-economic significance, often in the form of a critique of the host institution. At times this meant moving beyond the institutional framework in order to subvert the dominant position of such by exposing the internal power dynamics and problems associated with institutionalization.

In the 1980s and 90s these practices were further developed in the works of artists like Andrea Fraser and Fred Wilson. In exhibitions like Wilson’s *Mining the Museum*, at the Maryland Historical Society in 1992, one can observe how the field of art was increasingly influenced and informed by interdisciplinary forms of knowledge, including the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, philosophy, literary criticism, and so on. Moving even closer to the present, Kwon correctly points out the ongoing dual expansions of site-specific artworks

¹¹ There remains a great deal of debate around the subject, but many theorists agree that there have been three waves of institutional critique over the years, beginning with the first wave in the 1960s. For a more complete account of the evolution of institutional critique, there are a number of recent texts and online journal editions that address this topic. Nina Möntmann, ed., *Art And Its Institutions: Current Conflicts, Critique And Collaborations* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2006). John C. Welchman, ed., *Institutional Critique and After: Vol. 2 of the SoCCAS Symposia* (Zurich: JRP, Ringier, 2006).

¹² Miwon Kwon, “Genealogy of Site Specificity,” in *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Boston: MIT Press, 2002), 13.

(or context-sensitive, as I prefer to characterize such practices) in terms of both their spatial, physical orientations and their intellectual dimensions. Her description of current socially engaged, context-sensitive artistic practices is quite poignant:

the distinguishing characteristics of today's site-oriented art is the way in which the art work's relationship to the actuality of a location (as site) and the social conditions of the institutional frame (as site) are both subordinate to a *discursively* determined site that is delineated as a field of knowledge, intellectual exchange, or cultural debate.¹³

I am especially attracted to this description as it emphasizes the conceptual nature of these practices—their discursive properties—as productive in the development and refinement of knowledge, and in its processes of exchange and debate. By emphasizing these characteristics, Kwon asserts both the artistic and sociopolitical potency that are critical aspects of many of these projects. Far from merely “working together,” or helping to resolve some perceived societal ailment, I believe that the most interesting and successful socially engaged, collaborative public art projects today function as sites of contestation and debate. As will be shown in the analysis of the specific case studies, many of these projects create forums for the expression of multiple voices and multiple points of view, a process that is not entirely dissimilar to political debates or forums. With this in mind, then, it seems prudent to turn to the criteria I have established for the analysis and evaluation of such projects.

Towards the Development of Criteria for Evaluation

The very crux of this essay is founded on the analysis of recent exhibitions of socially engaged, collaborative public art specifically as works of art—and not some other type of

¹³ Miwon Kwon, “Genealogy of Site Specificity,” in *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Boston: MIT Press, 2002), 26.

work (i.e. social work, or political advocacy)—and as investigations into various sociopolitical issues. Recently there has been a resurgence of interest with regard to this topic, much of which focuses on the need to further develop the discourse and, concomitantly, the criteria for the evaluation of these types of projects. In addition to the writings of Miwon Kwon, the writings of Claire Bishop, Grant Kester, Claire Doherty, Patricia Phillips and Hal Foster have fueled a great deal of debate on the subject. Furthermore, many of these authors are responding to reoccurring questions concerning the relationship between art and societal life, such as Guy Debord's contributions to the Situationist movement,¹⁴ Nicolas Bourriaud's "relational aesthetics,"¹⁵ and Jacques Rancière's theories concerning the relationship of art and politics.¹⁶ With limited time and space, I will not attempt to account for each author's position in full, but rather focus on the main points around which I have developed my own criteria for analysis: these include the relationship between aesthetic and sociopolitical qualities; the issue of ethics in the development of these types of works (and the exhibition practices associated with them); the relationship between artistic autonomy and collaborative modes of production; and the point of reception and afterlife of the projects.

In the development of the criteria by which to evaluate the successfulness of the various exhibitions and projects, I have relied heavily on the writings of Claire Bishop in the construction of a framework for this critical analysis. In recent years Bishop has emerged as

¹⁴ Guy Debord, "Towards a Situationist International," in *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 96-101.

¹⁵ Nicolas Bourriaud, "Relational Aesthetics," in *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 160-171.

¹⁶ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006).

a prominent voice within the discourse concerning socially engaged, collaborative art practices, and it is in her writing that I find a great deal of correlation between her ideas and my own research: namely, to scrutinize, question and further complicate the assumptions upon which these practices are based and valued.¹⁷ In an essay published in *Artforum* in 2006: “The Social Turn: Collaborations and their Discontents,” Bishop identified what she believes to be the relevant criteria by which to analyze socially engaged art. Broadly speaking, the criteria can be divided into two separate yet deeply entwined categories: the aesthetic or artistic qualities of the project and its sociopolitical mode of address. However, according to Bishop, a reductive disjointedness has prevailed in recent art historical and critical writing on this subject, whereby many of these projects are judged less according to their status as art—per se—through a weighting of the analysis towards their political and social efficacy. In response to this trend Bishop wonders aloud: “Is there ground on which the two sides can meet?”¹⁸ Of course, this is a rhetorical provocation, and one that I will gladly take up.

In the process of determining the criteria to be employed, it has come to my attention that even the specific points of tension that are of keen interest vary widely from one project to the next in their significance and meaningfulness. This is largely the result of the contingent nature of the exhibitions, and the projects within. Their communicative power is always set within a given set of parameters, some of which are artistically motivated while others are beyond control. As for the aesthetic and sociopolitical intertwining at the core of

¹⁷ Jennifer Roche, “Socially Engaged Art, Critics and Discontents: An Interview with Claire Bishop,” Community Arts Network, http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/2006/07/socially_engage.php.

¹⁸ Claire Bishop, “The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents,” *Artforum* 44, No. 6 (Feb. 2006): 180.

the projects I have selected for analysis, I have identified a number of key attributes that I intend to further elucidate by engaging the writings of the authors listed above. To begin with, the aesthetic qualities that I have selected to help guide the different analyses involve the dialogical, open-ended design of the projects (in which communication is valued as an artistic medium in its own right), and their performative nature that emphasizes such characteristics as ephemerality, transience and contingency. As for the sociopolitical mode of address, the areas of interest involve the dialectical nature of the project's development around a certain issue or set of issues, its sensitivity to the context in which it operates (in both physical, or spatial, and intellectual terms), and the collaborative process of production with its underlying collectivity and psychology of inclusion. Furthermore, with respect to each of the exhibitions-as-case-studies that I have selected for analysis, the criteria will be explored across the various layers of interaction that are inherent to any exhibition process, with special attention paid to the relationships developed between the curators, artists, artistic projects and participants.

At a primary (and very personal) level, I believe that art and artists have the uncanny and unparalleled ability to affect, reveal and confound by way of the inherent interdisciplinarity of the field. The very reasons for which I have chosen to enter this field of practice, rather than any other, is the result of my interest in interdisciplinary modes of thought and visual expression. Works of art operate or perform on a number of different levels simultaneously, and thus are able to more aptly convey the very complexity of thought and life. Furthermore, such a conception of art opens the way towards the idea that anything can be considered artistic, while to reevaluate life and societal relations in this way also opens the way for the reinvigoration of such.

Art historian Patricia Phillips has long been a leading proponent and critic of interdisciplinary thought, especially as it relates to public art practices. Over the years she has written extensively on the subject. Phillips warns against an automatic reading of interdisciplinarity “as inherently constructive,” and acknowledges that such practices “can become compliant and neutralized, or authoritarian and doctrinaire, rather than open and inquiring.”¹⁹ This perspective speaks to the idea of socially engaged, collaborative public art as an open-ended, dialectical process. But what is of crucial significance here is that the questioning, inquisitiveness of the project must not become subservient to one position or another, but must retain a critical distance with regard to the various constituencies that are represented within the work/process. Phillips further asserts: “Interdisciplinarity is not simply an indiscriminate amalgamation of conventions from different fields, but a faceted way of looking at the formation of knowledge and the public realm... Interdisciplinary aesthetic practices are a way to think critically and act publicly.”²⁰ With regard to the forthcoming analyses, I will focus on exactly these processes of knowledge formation, conveyance and reception, asking: what are the interdisciplinary forms of knowledge that the curators and artists employ? Who do they intend to engage through such an address? And, aesthetically speaking, how are these elements assembled, layered and conveyed through the process of coming-into-being, of becoming visible?

The idea of communication as an artistic medium is a primary aesthetic attribute of the exhibitions and individual projects up for discussion here. In their own respective ways, the exhibitions and the works of art function as sites, as forums around and through which

¹⁹ Patricia C. Phillips, “(Inter)Disciplinary Actions,” *Public Art Review* 15, No. 1 (Fall/Winter 2003): 12.

²⁰ Ibid: 15.

various forms of expression are cast, collide, synthesize, decay and regenerate. After all, innovation and ingenuity in the public realm and in the arts do not necessarily solve problems, but more importantly create new ways of understanding and, in the process of doing so, create new issues to be confronted. To participate in art is to participate in an act of communication, and through conveyance ideas are transmitted, grappled with and metabolized. It should be no surprise by this point that I am a strong advocate for and supporter of works of art that maintain a critical attitude throughout their development, implementation and reception.

An interest in this facet of socially engaged, collaborative art is something that I share with Claire Bishop. One of the fundamental attributes of this kind of work involves the relationship between the artist(s) and collaborators. At the core of these practices is a contradiction between the artist as an autonomous actor (who is likely to approach the project from a position of privilege, a fact that often stands in stark contrast to the position of the participants) and the collective identification of the collaborative process. This tension is productive in the sense that it helps the project to maintain a critical distance, so that the different identities are not simply fused seamlessly into one another, protecting the work from devolving into mere complacency. Thus, I find myself very much in agreement with her view that:

The best collaborative practices of the past ten years address this contradictory pull between autonomy and social intervention, and reflect on this antimony both in the structure of the work *and* in the conditions of its reception. It is to this art—however uncomfortable, exploitative, or confusing it may first appear—that we must turn for an alternative to the well-intentioned homilies that today pass for critical discourse on

social collaboration... to confront darker, more painfully complicated considerations of our predicament.²¹

Part of what Bishop wishes to move away from, to reconsider, is what she has asserted as an ethical turn in critical writing as it pertains to socially engaged works of art. The discourse itself, Bishop argues, suffers from a reliance on preconceived ethical standards of how artists operate within and come to represent in their artworks certain constituencies, ideas and issues that may not otherwise directly relate to or involve them. This preoccupation with an ethics of engagement inserts a rift between the layers of aesthetic and sociopolitical qualities in these works. “Emphasis is shifted away from the disruptive *specificity* of a given work and onto a *generalized* set of moral precepts.”²² While this trend in art criticism may be well-intentioned, to assess a work of art that intends to embody the complexities of societal life—the tensions and multifaceted relationships that interconnect various constituencies—on the basis of its fairness or the appropriateness of the interaction, is an egregious oversight and a misidentification of the work through a dismissal of its aesthetic dimensions. Furthermore, the ethical standards by which such evaluations are made should not be immune to scrutiny, and should certainly not act as preventative measures for a deeper understanding of complex social interactions and their incarnations as works of art.

Recently this discourse has been further fueled by a debate that emerged in response to Bishop’s *Artforum* article mentioned above. The art historian and critic Grant Kester has assumed an oppositional stance in a debate with Bishop that took place through a highly

²¹ Claire Bishop, “The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents,” *Artforum* 44, No. 6 (Feb. 2006): 183.

²² *Ibid*: 181.

charged exchange of letters in a later issue of *Artforum*.²³ While it appears that each writer's opinions are diametrically opposed to the other's, there are perhaps more commonalities than the authors are willing to acknowledge. To be clear, there are important differences between their views concerning the nature, criteria for evaluation, and productivity of socially engaged, collaborative artworks. But the polarization of their critical positions is an exaggeration in my opinion, even if it is one that the both of them would like to uphold.

The relationship between aesthetics and sociopolitical discourses form the primary criterion for evaluation in Kester's research as well. In fact, much of his writing affirms that the way in which these qualities relate to each other, always in a very specific context, is at the heart of the successfulness and significance of "dialogical"²⁴ works of art. Kester also acknowledges a disassociation of the aesthetic and the sociopolitical in the criticism and discussions surrounding these works, and, as part of his larger interest in the field, attempts "to challenge the disengagement of the aesthetic from political discourse not by denying the knowledge produced by the body and the senses, but by analyzing the ways in which this knowledge both resists and collaborates with forms of social, cultural, and political power." Hence, Kester is committed to understanding and addressing "the political economy of the aesthetic."²⁵ This is a most important task, and integral to the investigation of politicized

²³ Grant Kester, "Another Turn," *Artforum* 44, No. 9 (May 2006): 22. Claire Bishop, "Claire Bishop Responds," *Artforum* 44, No. 9 (May 2006): 24.

²⁴ Kester refers to these kinds of practices as dialogical, in that what many of these projects share between them—and are largely informed and shaped by—is "the facilitation of dialogue and exchange." While I generally agree with this formulation, I prefer to emphasize the notion of debate over dialogue, as I feel that the latter term diffuses the political and social agency that such interactions catalyze. Grant Kester, "Dialogical Aesthetics," in *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 107.

²⁵ Grant Kester, "Learning from Aesthetics: Old Masters and New Lessons," *Art Journal* 56, No. 1 (Spring 1997): 24.

works of art. However, there is also the potential danger of muting the true aesthetic force of these works by making the aesthetic simply a tool of the political. Bishop is critical of this undermining of the aesthetic, and just as one must be vigorous in the analysis of collaborative practices with regard to their sociopolitical mode of address, so too is it necessary “to discuss, analyze, and compare such work critically *as art*.”²⁶ After all, as I have attempted to outline throughout this section, it is not simply that these works of art also involve some sociopolitical commentary, but how the different layers of aesthetic and sociopolitical characteristics interconnect, resonate, and/or create internal antagonisms within the work that emanate outwards to the various constituencies.

This leads to another important consideration that needs to be accounted for: the idea that socially engaged, collaborative practices empower the participants through processes of collective inclusion and by representing a symbolic power struggle within which the various constituencies are themselves transformed into agents of change. This is arguably the most important and most neglected aspect of these works, at least in the evaluation of the successfulness of a given project, namely, its purpose and ability to truly affect. While many of the theorists listed above acknowledge this empowering function (which is, in fact, often the very objective of the work itself), I have yet to uncover any attempt to explore how this actually manifests and the possibility of any real, lasting effects from such processes. Part of the problem here is that very little has been done to develop methods for the qualification and quantification of this function, a process that would require a prolonged and dedicated engagement with the identified subjects. This problem is something that plagues my own

²⁶ Claire Bishop, “The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents,” *Artforum* 44, No. 6 (Feb. 2006): 180.

analyses here as well, but I hope to at least push these limitations as far as possible, even if relying on second-hand accounts from individuals involved in the different projects. For the present moment, however, I will begin by picking apart the assumption of empowerment and agency in order to better understand how and why these works are considered valuable for such.

One of the first assumptions made is that the communities engaged as part of the collaborative process are marginal to societal life; that these people have been left out, ignored, or overshadowed. First of all, the labeling of people as marginal to society in some way is not a prerequisite for the possibility of empowerment. However, collaborative projects that focus their attention on the sociopolitical rifts and tensions within societal life seem to elicit much more impassioned responses. As such, the collaborative projects that I am most interested in are those that create a kind of stage upon which different perspectives are represented in a symbolic struggle for power. After all, underlining these projects are issues concerned with the power relations within society (which are administered from the top down, more often than not), and through collaborative models of production this trickle-down effect is disrupted or even subverted. While I am inclined to believe that many of these projects provide a sense of ownership and agency within the creative process that may otherwise be lacking in social and political life, I firmly reject the idea that at their core these projects are of a utopian nature, or have some utopian evocation.²⁷

²⁷ In a recent interview Kester commented: "I've always felt that the power of art rested in its ability to evoke utopian possibilities." This kind of sentiment is in line with what I feel is most detracting from Kester's arguments, namely, the way that he inadvertently de-politicizes what are otherwise highly charged, politically potent works of art. Mick Wilson, "Autonomy, Agonism, and Activist Art: An Interview with Grant Kester," *Art Journal* 66, No. 3 (Fall 2007): 115.

Breaking down this assumption even further, there are two concepts that are pivotal to the empowering function of these works of art: the concepts of community and representation. The concept of community has become a buzzword employed across various disciplines in recent years, and in being used so carelessly, many theorists have begun to seriously question its usefulness and applicability. Just as the notion of collaboration suffers from over-generalization, so too does the idea of community fall prey to overuse and a lack of contextual specificity. The concept of community is an integral part of Miwon Kwon's analysis of site-specificity and the development of locational identities. Despite "the habitual tendency" of artists and other cultural practitioners to link community with a particular social group or issue, Kwon correctly problematizes this tendency:

the "community," coveted in contemporary political, economic, social, and cultural discourses alike, is not bound to any particular class, gender, ethnicity, age group, religion, location, or even type of cause. Insofar as its invocation can serve a broad range of purposes, for the liberal left and the conservative right, and designate a wide array of group types, its rhetorical uses today are fraught with more ambiguity and flexibility than are accounted for by either advocates or critics of community-based art.²⁸

In response to these often ignored and unresolved ambiguities, Kwon develops a very different notion of community that itself replaces the generality of the term with a more concerted specificity, as "collective artistic praxis." This formulation is closely aligned with my idea above concerning the generative nature of socially engaged, collaborative art. Kwon explains:

It involves a provisional group, produced as a function of specific circumstances instigated by an artist and/or a cultural institution, aware of the effects of these

²⁸ Miwon Kwon, "The (Un)Sittings of Community," in *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Boston: MIT Press, 2002), 147-148.

circumstances on the very conditions of the interaction, performing its own coming together and coming apart as a necessarily incomplete modeling or working-out of a collective social process.²⁹

Here, context-specificity and sensitivity are generative concepts in the development, implementation and reception of the work of art. The context—as a set of conditions that, again, ranges from the spatiotemporal to the conceptual parameters of the process and always in relation to a specific group of participants—both forms and is formed by such processes of “coming together and coming apart.” In short, contextual functionality is under continuous (re)negotiation, and thus is characterized by its instability rather than its security. Another key element of Kwon’s recipe for “collective artistic praxis” is the high level of (self-)reflexivity that her formulation entails. Here, art historian and critic Hal Foster’s concept of “parallactic work”³⁰ may also be valuable. This is an exceedingly pressing issue, especially as the representational nature of art becomes more closely aligned with the notion of representation in politics in many of the projects to be considered.

This infusion of political representation into the artistic realm takes its cue from notions of democracy and the role of the *polis* within democratic processes. Debate and contestation are the cornerstones of a healthy political sphere, and I hold the same for works of art that attempt to address issues that also blend into the realms of the social sciences and beyond. By including different perspectives, projects of this type do not intend to resolve the

²⁹ Miwon Kwon, “The (Un)Sittings of Community,” in *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Boston: MIT Press, 2002), 154.

³⁰ Towards the end of his essay, Foster states: “I have advocated parallactic work that attempts to frame the framer as he or she frames the other. This is one way to negotiate the contradictory status of otherness as given and constructed, real and fantasmatic.” Hal Foster, “The Artist as Ethnographer,” in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 203.

issues at hand, nor should they. It would be rather presumptuous to assume that a single artistic project or exhibition could reconcile issues of class or race (to name but a couple). But what these projects, and exhibitions thereof, are able to do is direct people's attention to these issues, unveil (i.e. make visible) the inner-workings of these power dynamics through the creation of distinct situations, and, above all, to breed consciousness and awareness. But perhaps this is not enough, and additional focus should be paid as to what forms of knowledge are being developed, represented and expressed.

In order to better understand the representational nature of socially engaged, collaborative art, we must further consider the relationship between the artist(s) and the participants/collaborators. What stands out most starkly about this relationship is its contradictory nature. This qualification is not intended as a slight, however, for it is exactly the working-through of such contradictions that lends to the truly generative and transformative experience of collective activity. In her response to Kester in *Artforum*, Bishop provocatively states: "we can no longer speak of old-fashioned autonomy versus radical engagement, since a dialectical pull between autonomy and heteronomy is itself constitutive of the aesthetic."³¹ The artist is a creative agent who is always somewhere in-between, oscillating between their identification as artist, as progenitor, and their identification with the other participants through the process of collaboration. Furthermore, it is exactly how this relationship plays out over the course of the project that largely informs the aesthetic experience and meaning of the work in question.

³¹ Claire Bishop, "Claire Bishop Responds," *Artforum* 44, No. 9 (May 2006): 24.

Yet, Kester is correct to point out how this relationship is usually already wrought with a fundamental contradiction, and one that largely affects the sense of agency and empowerment through the project. Kester is critical of the liberatory agenda of many of these kinds of projects, and in this way is not so distant from Bishop in her focus upon the dialectical, contradictory and uncomfortable union of various constituencies and identities in such projects. In discussing the way that activist art often transgresses social and cultural boundaries, and is celebrated for such, Kester points out how a liberatory agenda

can also provide a convenient alibi for the fact that these “liberatory” transgressions almost always seem to move from a position of greater to lesser privilege; the open door of identity swings in only one direction because it is generally the artist who has the cultural and financial resources necessary to transgress such boundaries in the first place.³²

It is for these reasons, among others that I have outlined, that I have chosen to focus specifically on the critical nature of socially engaged, collaborative art—both in its internal and external relations—and its ability to make visible what is otherwise invisible. In this way I hope to more accurately account for the multiplicity of views and mediating forces that quite purposefully ordain these projects as sites of critical cultural and societal worth.

The Role of the Curator

Now I would like to briefly consider the role of the curator within the development and exhibition of socially engaged, collaborative art, as well as the larger exhibition frameworks from which the collaborative projects grow. Within the past 15 years or so, there has been an unprecedented surge in critical writing directed towards the ever-changing

³² Grant Kester, “Beyond the White Cube: Activist Art and the Legacy of the 1960s,” *Public Art Review* 14, No. 2 (Spring/Summer 2003): 11.

role of the curator within contemporary art practices. The sense of urgency that this proliferation of material underlines has everything to do with the relative indefiniteness of current curatorial practices—an informative facet of what has been dubbed “an expanded field of curating.”³³ Unfortunately, much of this material is rather anecdotal in nature, wherein prominent curators are asked to reflect on their own working methodologies and career trajectories, as opposed to delving deeper into the theoretical precepts from which their work emanates or through dialogue and debate with other curators. Of course, there are a number of exceptions. For instance, internationally renowned curator and serial interviewer, Hans Ulrich Obrist, has contributed a great variety of material to the ongoing sophistication of the curatorial discourse. Most recently Obrist has compiled and edited a group of texts that form the first attempt of a professional working in the field to draft a history of curatorial practices,³⁴ a perspective that the field is greatly lacking, both as a kind of self-reflexive knowledge of its own history and in relation to the history of art in general.

Without meandering too far away from the subject at hand, I would like to suggest that the role of the curator within contemporary art production and exhibition practices is fundamentally a matter of caring for the various relationships involved in the exhibition process (whatever this process may be). Previously I have been inclined to disregard the more conventional notion of a curator as an institutional steward, as the caretaker and overseer of a specific collection of art; I believed this definition to be severely outmoded, unable to account for the plurality of positions and roles that now define the curatorial

³³ Kate Fowle, “Who Cares? Understanding the Role of the Curator Today,” in *Cautionary Tales: Critical Curating*, ed. Steven Rand and Heather Kouris (New York: apexart, 2007), 34.

³⁴ Hans Ulrich Obrist, ed., *A Brief History of Curating* (Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2009).

subject, especially in the extension of their activities beyond institutional frameworks.³⁵ However, I have come to understand the contemporary curatorial identity quite differently over the course of this research, and believe that certain nuances of the now seemingly outdated definition of the curator are still relevant and quite meaningful. Nowadays, the curatorial function is often carried out through the careful negotiation of relationships, and, especially when the artworks in question tend towards the performative and/or ephemeral, often what is created over the course of an exhibition are new relationships or reformulations of previously established relationships (i.e. between curator and artist, artwork and audience, etc.). Furthermore, the curator now also functions as a significant creative agent in their own right, actively participating in the development of artists' projects, and in the selection of mediating devices employed in the presentation of an exhibition—the exhibition's mode of address and intended public(s).

Speaking more directly to the role of the curator within socially engaged, collaborative public art practices, the position of the curator appears highly porous; at times it is difficult to distinguish the curatorial activity from the artistic. More often than not, however, the role of the curator is one step removed from the direct engagement of the individual projects, procuring the necessary “raw materials” for each of the given projects and helping to facilitate their development as a critical intermediary. The curator, then, also oscillates between autonomy and heteronomy, adding yet another dimension to the dialectical processes of project development and knowledge formation. Claire Doherty, a writer and

³⁵ Most commonly, this dislodging of the curator from their institutional posts is referred to as independent curatorship. However, I find this terminology highly misleading. Perhaps more appropriate is Paul O'Neill's formulation of the “co-dependent curator,” in acknowledgement of the sustaining relationship between curators and their institutional partners, even if this relationship is now marked by temporariness and greater mobility. Paul O'Neill, “The Co-dependent Curator,” *Art Monthly* 291 (Nov. 2005): 7-8.

critic based out of Bristol, UK, has recently provided a well-elucidated description of the role of the curator within “context-specific international exhibitions.” The curatorial function, in her view, is manifold:

To support the artist to produce a process, project or work that responds to place as a mutable concept, with due consideration to the context of the group dynamic; that is true to the artist’s practice, but which moves beyond a replication of previous work; that eventually may also operate outside the originating context; [and] To support and engender encounters—recruiting participants, engaging viewers, interlocutors and collaborators to experience the projects and works as autonomous significations within the logic of an exhibition; provoking opportunities for new understandings and responses to context and initiating potential outcomes beyond the event-exhibition.³⁶

There are multiple expectations embedded in this formulation, all that point to the facilitative and catalytic role of the curator, as well as positing the curator as a kind of “manager” of the exhibition process and in its emanations out into the world. Claire Bishop observes how “socially engaged and participatory art projects are so complex, sprawling and context-based that the only person with a handle on the overall project is invariably the curator.”³⁷ Thus, rather than shifting completely from a vertical to a horizontal working model, the position of power assumed by the curator maintains, but it is a dynamic that is more open-ended and indeterminate, itself a potential subject of analysis and critique.

The incredible difficulty that projects of socially engaged, collaborative tasks entail—in terms of both logistical planning and problem solving, not to mention the psychological toll that accompanies improvisational working models and their inherent risks—has often led

³⁶ Claire Doherty, “Curating Wrong Places... or Where Have All the Penguins Gone?,” in *Curating Subjects*, ed. Paul O’Neill (London: Open Editions, 2007), 103.

³⁷ Jennifer Roche, “Socially Engaged Art, Critics and Discontents: An Interview with Claire Bishop,” Community Arts Network, http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/2006/07/socially_engage.php.

to the formation of curatorial teams in order to more adequately respond to such challenges. However, the organization of a curatorial team, or as the art historian John Clark prefers: “curatorium,” is not without political and cultural implications. The inner-workings of the curatorial team and their hierarchical organization guide the selection of and support for artists and their projects, along with the overarching themes or conceptual nature of the exhibition.³⁸ These collaborative models of curatorial production—always a new undertaking, but colored by the memory of past projects; a “projective”³⁹ endeavor—resemble and take their cue from the collective processes they are initiating. I am particularly keen to the idea that curators, artists, administrators, directors, etc., today are ever-increasingly open to the influence of their co-practitioners. Many authors have taken note of the ongoing cross-pollination between these subject positions, a multi-directional exchange. Curator of contemporary art, Jens Hoffmann explains his interest and investment in these processes during a virtual round table discussion between 10 curators:

I’ve been increasingly fascinated by the idea of the curator as author and creator rather than as a facilitator or administrator of exhibitions. A clear paradigm shift in curating has been taking place over the last fifteen years as a result of the integration of artistic strategies into curatorial work that has changed our understanding of curating.⁴⁰

In the passages leading up to this point I have suggested that the role of the curator today blends creativity with the facilitation and coordination of artistic projects. In my opinion, it

³⁸ John Clark, “Histories of the Asian ‘New’: Biennales and Contemporary Asian Art,” in *Asian Art History in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Vishakha N. Desai (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 235.

³⁹ Miwon Kwon, “The (Un)Sittings of Community,” in *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Boston: MIT Press, 2002), 154.

⁴⁰ Jens Hoffmann, et al, “10 Curators—A Conversation on the Internet,” in *Ice Cream: Contemporary Art in Culture* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 2007), 10.

is not a matter of one characteristic over or instead of another, and while Hoffmann perhaps has his own particular agenda, there is no reason to devalue the great amount of planning and orchestrating that largely defines curatorial activity. Nonetheless, I am intrigued by Hoffmann's acknowledgement of curatorial authorship within the exhibition process. This issue has long been a point of controversy, often encountering a great deal of opposition and even hostility from artists who feel that they are being instrumentalized or framed in such a way that is inconsistent with their own intentions.⁴¹

The issue of authorship has also been a central point of concern within the discourse surrounding socially engaged, collaborative public art. Many critics of these types of works deny the significance of authorship on ethical grounds, as based upon some liberally minded ethical position where the (underprivileged) participants should necessarily be equal authors of the project in question. Claire Bishop is not so willing to subscribe to such a reading of these kinds of projects, and her position on the issue of authorship is congruent with her questioning of the ethical impulse or guidelines that dominate the discussion of such works.

There is a common belief that reduced authorial status is more "democratic" and "ethical" than an artist imposing their vision or will on a group of participants. I think we can question all of these assumptions. Overturning the very premises from which social engagement operates can be both artistically and critically invigorating.⁴²

⁴¹ This is particularly true of many prominent artists associated with the first wave of institutional critique in the 1960s. A prime example is Robert Smithson's essay "Cultural Confinement," or Daniel Buren's essay "Exhibitions of an exhibition," both of which were directed towards internationally renowned curator Harald Szeemann in response to his heavy-handed curatorial approach for Documenta V in 1972. Both essays were subsequently included in the catalogue of the show. The issue has also recently come to the forefront as part of the development of a post-colonial discourse, as well as with regard to the proliferation of the international biennial model over the past 20 years or so.

⁴² Jennifer Roche, "Socially Engaged Art, Critics and Discontents: An Interview with Claire Bishop," Community Arts Network, http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/2006/07/socially_engage.php.

Furthermore, in her response to Kester's letter in *Artforum*, she rejects what she believes to be Kester's "righteous aversion to authorship," asserting instead: "I believe in the continued value of disruption... as a form of resistance to instrumental rationality *and* as a source of transformation." The disruption that Bishop alludes to is the tension that exists between the individual authorship—and authority—of the curator or artist and the collective authorship that results from multiple forms of participation. Again, it is not an issue of one or another form of authorship. It is the suspension of these contradictions in a dialectical relationship that requires a critical reassessment of both positions. The question of authorship is still highly relevant, since the projects in question "have a life beyond an immediate social goal."⁴³ After all, these are works of art, and despite their ephemerality, the documents of each project and exhibition circulate and accrue capital (i.e. economic, cultural, political, etc.) in much the same way as "original" art objects.

Finally, it seems prudent to address the notion of context more specifically, and the role of the city as a protagonist and/or proposition within the exhibition structures that I have selected as case studies. In many of her recent writings, Claire Doherty has extended Kwon's discussion of "the wrong place,"⁴⁴ highlighting its aesthetic of displacement and fragmentation, while focusing on the recent curatorial preoccupation with "place" or "context" as the subject of many international exhibitions and biennial editions. This growing interest, she claims, results "from the convergence of three commissioning models: the scattered-site international exhibition... the research-based project programme... and the

⁴³ Claire Bishop, "Claire Bishop Responds," *Artforum* 44, No. 9 (May 2006): 24.

⁴⁴ Miwon Kwon, "The Wrong Place," *Art Journal* 59, No. 1 (Spring 2000): 33-44.

residency model.”⁴⁵ The two exhibitions that I have selected for analysis all blend aspects of these three models, but, as each exhibition is rooted in its own particular context, the recipe for each is quite distinct, bearing the influence of the host city. Thus, without further ado, I would like to turn to a discussion of the case studies and investigate how these various ideas manifest in the actual working processes of the two exhibitions and a few examples of artistic projects within.

⁴⁵ Claire Doherty, “Curating Wrong Places... or Where Have All the Penguins Gone?,” in *Curating Subjects*, ed. Paul O’Neill (London: Open Editions, 2007), 102.

A City in Multiples and the Art of Multiplicity

In the spring of 2003, from March 20th to the 20th of April, Panama City, Panama, was transformed into an exhibition platform—a kind of museum or gallery without walls—providing a dynamic and indeterminate context for the realization of the public art exhibition *ciudadMULTIPLEcity*. Exploding throughout the city, emerging out of unpredictable moments and unconventional spaces, only to recede back into the forest of signs from which they came, the 12 projects of *ciudadMULTIPLEcity* were experiments in radical urban art practices.⁴⁶ As such, this exhibition of socially engaged, collaborative public art was not concerned with the ability of art to adorn or beautify spaces of the city, nor to offer any corrective measure to the inequalities within societal life that are rampant in such global financial centers like Panama City. The planning, design and implementation of the exhibition was thus “definitely against a passive, ‘happy’ exhibition, so to speak, and all for agitation and confrontation, in order to expose different underlying social, political, ethical, symbolic, economic and psychological realities at work in this city.”⁴⁷ The exhibition took on additional significance as it gained support from the local government as part of their yearlong centennial celebration. This fact further imbued the exhibition with a sense of pride for the inhabitants of the city, connecting local cultural forms and practices with an international art world and audience, delineating the city as a significant stopover for itinerant art world practitioners as well as other theorists.

⁴⁶ Gerardo Mosquera and Adrienne Samos, “Riding on a Wild One,” *zingmagazine*, <http://www.zingmagazine.com/issue19/mosquera.html>.

⁴⁷ Adrienne Samos, email to the author, March 26, 2009.

As previously suggested, the exhibition design of *ciudadMULTIPLEcity* intertwined aspects of the scattered-site international exhibition, research-based project program, and residency model. A total of 13 artists were invited to participate in the exhibition: 10 international artists from various parts of the world, and 3 artists from Panama.⁴⁸ Each of the international artists visited Panama City at least twice: many months before the opening of the exhibition the artists made their first visits, to better acquaint themselves, and to initiate dialogues with the city; and returned a second time for the exhibition proper, to conduct further research and develop their work in situ. This form of engagement was starkly different from the more embedded approach that was characteristic of the Panamanian artists. Thus, the different residency models were employed with varying effects, revealing the very mutability of such processes. As a relatively open-ended and pervasive exhibition design, there was no identifiable exhibition center, no singular exhibition structure through which the artistic projects were channeled and conveyed. Instead, it was exactly the multiple nature of the city—its many identities, desires, dreams, expectations, and failures—that fueled the development of each project, and provided the raw (im)materiality of the various artistic projects.

One of the primary, guiding principles of the exhibition was the idea of the city as a complicit and integral “living protagonist of works of art that would in turn act upon it.”⁴⁹ This is a very exciting proposition, in my opinion, in that it moves beyond the rigidity of

⁴⁸ The list of international artists included: Francis Alÿs & Rafael Ortega, Ghada Amer, Gustavo Artigas, Artway of Thinking, Yoan Capote, Cildo Meireles, Juan Andrés Milanés, Jesús Palomino, and Gu Xiong. Panamanian artists included: Brooke Alfaro, Gustavo Araujo, and Humberto Veléz.

⁴⁹ Gerardo Mosquera and Adrienne Samos, “Art with the City,” in *ciudadMULTIPLEcity: Arte Panamá 2003* (Amsterdam: KIT Publishers, 2004), 31.

period shows, or even thematic exhibitions. It presents the exhibition structure as one of possibilities, particularly in its flexibility and open-endedness. Yet, such a proposition is not without its own parameters and limitations. In fact, working in public spaces—as will be further elaborated in the following analyses—presents an entirely different set of problems and logistical conundrums that are, in a way, the very essence of such an undertaking. To work in public space is also to probe and question the very “publicness” of that space.

If the city is a “living protagonist,” a creative agent in the development of works of art, then what exactly is the working relationship between the city, artists and works of art? How does this interactivity play out over the course of the exhibition? In varying degrees, I believe that this relationship is dialectical in nature. Many of the works in the show were developed over time—with interests geared more towards the process of creation rather than some final product—just as any conception of the city is always a work in progress, always incomplete. In their catalogue essay for the exhibition, curators Gerardo Mosquera and Adrienne Samos suggested this dialectical relationship between the artworks and the city, as always folding back upon itself, a ceaseless cycle of influence and interpenetration:

the works of ciudadMULTIPLEcity were directed to move in a circle: from the city toward the art and from art toward the city. Some works invited participation, others not, but both the works themselves as well as the artists’ working methods generated multiple dialogues with the metropolis, its people and imaginaries.⁵⁰

This type of working relationship is one of constant change. With each turn of the circle new perspectives are revealed, information is metabolized and ideas slam into one another like particles in an atomic accelerator. This dialectical process is the creative foundation of the

⁵⁰ Gerardo Mosquera and Adrienne Samos, “Art with the City,” in *ciudadMULTIPLEcity: Arte Panamá 2003* (Amsterdam: KIT Publishers, 2004), 34.

works that attempt to exist within, act upon, and make visible those aspects of the urban environment that remain in flux. This dialecticism “makes art much more ‘vulnerable’ to the ways it is understood by the different audiences.”⁵¹ I am especially attracted to this idea of the vulnerability of art, as it conveys a sense of the porosity of the artistic process as well as the instability of the artistic message: it is always, and quite purposefully, open to interpretation. The strategies utilized by curators, artists and their collaborators in order to create such critical sites are evident in the very working methodologies that the artists and their collaborators employed, the manifestations of which are exactly how or in what way they layer the aesthetic and the sociopolitical. Mosquera and Samos explain: “a group of artists were called together to work not only *in* the city, but *with* the city, by designing projects that would have a direct impact on the metropolitan area, its communities, imaginaries, problems, dreams, preoccupations... Art capable of resonating with the people in the street and with the life and dynamics of the multiple, complex capital of a tiny global country.”⁵²

Turning more directly to the role of the curators, their utilization of a more “de-centralized” curatorial methodology is critical to an understanding of the exhibition’s development and daily operations. The curatorial team and project administration was relatively small when one considers the amount of work, logistical problem solving, and on-the-fly, improvisational coordinating that is at the heart of an exhibition of socially engaged, collaborative public art like *ciudadMULTIPLEcity*. In addition to Mosquera and Samos, the

⁵¹ Gerardo Mosquera and Adrienne Samos, “Riding on a Wild One,” *zingmagazine*, <http://www.zingmagazine.com/issue19/mosquera.html>.

⁵² Gerardo Mosquera and Adrienne Samos, “Art with the City,” in *ciudadMULTIPLEcity: Arte Panamá 2003* (Amsterdam: KIT Publishers, 2004), 23.

team consisted of two assistant curators, a project manager and an administrator. In the end, however, the curatorial team relinquished much of their control over the development and implementation of the different projects through the use of a large number of volunteers from a variety of different but interrelated fields (i.e. art, architecture, sociology, design, etc.).⁵³

The guiding structure was such that:

Each of the foreign participants had a young local artist as principal liaison, who, with various collaborators, was responsible for helping in every way. They acted as direct collaborators for the visitors from the time of their first stay in Panama, above all in their relations with the city and in arranging the logistics for each project.⁵⁴

This organizational model allowed for deeper and more personal interaction between the visiting artists and the city through direct contact with the inhabitants and other cultural producers. Furthermore, the relationship between each foreign artist and their “direct collaborator” was one of symbiosis, whereby the local artists and other technicians were able to work up close and learn from the artists to which they were assigned. In fact, one of the most important and lasting benefits of the exhibition was this cross-cultural dialogue, and invigoration of the local contemporary art scene through the influence of established international artists and curators.⁵⁵ Craig Garrett, an art critic writing for the journal *Art Nexus*, summarized the situation by stating how the “de-centralized curatorial method made use of the local scene’s open-endedness: instead of being directed from above, international artists worked alongside local artists, capitalizing on this pool of specialized knowledge to

⁵³ Adrienne Samos, email to the author, March 26, 2009.

⁵⁴ Gerardo Mosquera and Adrienne Samos, “Art with the City,” in *ciudadMULTIPLEcity: Arte Panamá 2003* (Amsterdam: KIT Publishers, 2004), 34-5.

⁵⁵ Adrienne Samos, email to the author, March 26, 2009.

tailor their work to the city's unique micro-politics. In return, many locals—engineers, architects, bus painters—received a firsthand course in groundbreaking art.”⁵⁶

In the opening discussion of this essay I described the changing role of the curator today, suggesting that often the curator is not so much a caretaker of objects, of the works of art themselves, but as an intermediary between various constituencies, as caring for the relationships that interlace the exhibition structure. The positions assumed by Mosquera and Samos could very well be described in this way. While this organizational model may have been more instinctual than premeditated,⁵⁷ the effects were crucial to the overall success of the exhibition. According to Mosquera and Samos, they “played a more active role in the planning phase, in artistic control, and in the general guidance of the event.”⁵⁸ As co-curators, they developed a working process and project organization that efficiently displaced their authorial control by incorporating various other voices and perspectives into the overall project scope. Theirs was a strange twist of curatorial creativity by which they authored an event structure that quite purposefully undermined their overarching authorial positions. In fact, this was necessary in order for the visiting artists “to delve cozily into the city’s rough byways, going well beyond an outsider’s approach,” and it was “[t]he network of human relations with colleagues and other local people around each participating artist, [that] made such understanding possible.”⁵⁹ In order to further ground this analysis in the actual working

⁵⁶ Craig Garrett, “Multiple City: Panamá 2003, Fundación Arte Panamá,” *Art Nexus* 2, No. 49 (June/August 2003): 93.

⁵⁷ Adrienne Samos, email to the author, March 26, 2009.

⁵⁸ Gerardo Mosquera and Adrienne Samos, “Art with the City,” in *ciudadMULTIPLEcity: Arte Panamá 2003* (Amsterdam: KIT Publishers, 2004), 35.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

processes of the artists and their collaborators, I will turn to consider two projects within the exhibition: Brooke Alfaro's large-scale video projections, entitled *Nine*, and the sculptural street installations of Jesús Palomino, entitled *Vendors and Squatters*.

Brooke Alfaro: *Nine*, 2002-3

Brooke Alfaro's contribution to *ciudadMULTIPLEcity* further pursued his long-time interest in working with and representing marginalized individuals, but was a significant break away from his career as a painter for many years. For the project *Nine*, 2002-3 [Plate 1.1-2], Alfaro spent roughly a year working with two rival gangs from the Barraza housing project, one of the most dangerous and impoverished areas of Panama City. Despite the fact that Alfaro is a native of Panama City, there was still much to overcome as he attempted to bridge the social and economic divide that separates and isolates this area of the city and its inhabitants. But this, after all, is one of the most striking and critical aspects of the work: the prolonged engagement and insertion of the artist into a community in order to enact a process of creation that hinges on the collaborative input of various perspectives and voices. This relationship was extremely tenuous, however, and more than once the gangs threatened to pull out of the project. Throughout the yearlong process, Alfaro's relationship with the two gangs—as a kind of mediator or arbiter between the two factions, who were sworn enemies—a sense of antagonism prevailed. While the three parties (Alfaro and the two respective gangs) never existed in the same place at the same time, through the project and the artist's identity a link was created, a kind of agonistic public sphere in which the project existed as its ultimate embodiment.

This interaction between Alfaro and the inhabitants of Barraza culminated in the production of a two-channel video projection depicting the two rival gangs lip-synching to

recent hit songs by local rapper El Roockie—a former gang member and much admired artist from the community who had recently gained international fame.⁶⁰ The form and content of both videos relied heavily on the popular genre of music videos and the entertainment industry, utilizing similar editing techniques, panning camera movements and shifting between close-ups of the individual participants and macro zooms locating each group in relation to their turf. This equated the identity of each individual gang with the spaces they occupied, the very spaces that were constantly at the center of their struggle. The art critic and curator Bennett Simpson, writing for the art journal *Third Text*, provides a first-hand account of the event:

Screened in side-by-side projections against a building face in the impoverished Barraza housing projects, the footage of the performances showed two groups of nearly identical teenage boys mugging and dancing for the camera as they mouthed lyrics about ghetto justice and self-aggrandisement. Shy at first, uncertain whether they were compromising their stoic, hardened pride, the youths kept themselves in check. Soon, however, performativity took over; by the end of their songs the gang members were competing with each other for the spotlight.⁶¹

Of particular interest here is Simpson's highlighting of the performative nature of the video installation. This performativity functions on a number of different levels, and it is an important point that I will return to. For the moment, I will continue to focus on the more formal aspects of the piece. A major part of the work's success involves the combination of artistic forms, of an internationally recognized visual artist adapting the sensibilities of popular culture, a key strategy in engaging both the participants in the videos as well as the different attendant audiences. Alfaro blended together large-scale outdoor video projections with music video-style montages, elevating the identity of the participants to a larger than life

⁶⁰ Cay Sophie Rabinowitz, "Panama City, Panama," *Art Papers* 27, No. 4 (August 2003): 54.

⁶¹ Bennett Simpson, "Multiple City: Arte Panama 2003," *Third Text* 17, No. 3 (Sept. 2003): 290.

scale (both literally and figuratively). For the brief 14 minutes of video projection, these individuals—often disdained within their community for their criminal identities and the fear they instill—became celebrities, objects of idolization, with the crowd’s cheers echoing in waves with each movement, dance step or posturing. Through this blending of sensibilities, Alfaro denies the perceived differences between such forms of artistic creation, and through this purposeful act of obfuscation creates multiple points of entry into the work without relying on any singular vantage point.

The dual projection of the rival gangs side-by-side upon the very housing projects that delineate their ongoing turf wars is another critical component of the event. Much of the significance of this decision has to do with the larger issue of the context of the work’s development and exhibition—the relation of its physical and conceptual dimensions—, a discussion that I will also hold off on momentarily. A relationship is established by projecting the two gangs together, albeit even if that relationship is open-ended, a matter of interpretation and shaded by personal biases. Throughout the duration of the projections, by way of the very proximity of the images and the synchronization of the performances, there appears a potential for both violence and resolution. Symbolically, the work questions the various tensions that exist between these (for all other reasons, quite similar) groupings of youths, revealing both the arbitrariness of their hostility and the reality of imminent danger. In fact, with the agreement of both gangs to participate in Alfaro’s work a change has already occurred: the projections of their images are allowed to comingle as part of the exhibition, and through this visual parallel one begins to see these individuals in a different way (and perhaps they come to see themselves differently as well). However, the projections come to a close as one rival member passes a soccer ball to his counterpart in the other projection (the

edited intervention of Alfaro's artistry), but it remains unclear as to whether or not this gesture is an act of conciliation or a challenge.⁶²

In observance of the processual nature of the work, one could argue that the project can be deconstructed into two different yet deeply interconnected phases of production. The second phase of the piece, the translation of the artistic process and lived experience into a video installation, I have already detailed above. Now I would like to further consider the initial phase of the project: the research performed by the artist and the development of personal relationships with potential collaborators. During this process of embedding himself in the community, many figures from the community weigh in as to the direction and nature of the project, thus creating a kind of group of advisors that emerge directly from the neighborhood itself. For the catalog description of Alfaro's work, critic and author Alberto Gualde relates the precariousness of this situation:

For almost a year the artist entered into an alien and dangerous territory, formulated the dialogue, approached the members of the deadly hostile urban tribes (as well as families, friends, and religious and community leaders), suggested the music, listened to opinions and variations, and on countless occasions faced the possibility that one or the other gang would abandon the project in progress.⁶³

The process that Gualde describes in this passage is the process of collaboration that I have outlined previously, specifically as a process charged with an unpredictable energy. Although this notion is often loosely employed to describe situations in which more than one person is involved in the creative process, I prefer a much more electric articulation of this concept, one that is particularly resonant with the sociopolitical implications that are prevalent in a truly collaborative undertaking. Any exhibition and any work of art can be

⁶² Cay Sophie Rabinowitz, "Panama City, Panama," *Art Papers* 27, No. 4 (August 2003): 54.

⁶³ Alberto Gualde, "Nueve/Nine, Brooke Alfaro," in *ciudadMULTIPLEcity: Arte Panamá 2003*, ed. Gerardo Mosquera and Adrienne Samos (Amsterdam: KIT Publishers, 2004), 72.

deemed collaborative on the basis that there is always input from a variety of sources, but this conception dilutes the great potential of collaboration: that is, a process of contestation and debate that forces one's self out of a zone of comfort, wherein the very working-through of ideas develops new knowledge and innovative means of expression.

Brooke Alfaro's project engages this form of collaborative practice. In order to be successful Alfaro must extend himself beyond himself—physically he must move in and through spaces that are foreign to him; conceptually he must open his mind to the ideas and thoughts of those he encounters, to not simply consider their input, but to metabolize this information in a process of complication. Here the notion of improvisation becomes informative. In order to really engage the community of Barraza (itself a diverse conglomerate), Alfaro must be focused in his pursuit, while simultaneously maintaining openness with regard to the whole endeavor. The project is both his and not his alone, and thus the other participants must be allowed to enter, to (re)engage him along with each other, to introduce their own stakes in the process. This is the very nature of improvising: the development of a loosely designed plan, but one in which variance, flexibility, chance and fluidity are structurally built in. Furthermore, the act of improvisation is fundamentally social. To return to the idea of performativity, it could be argued that there are multiple layers of performance within this piece. Aside from the rather obvious performative nature of the video projections, one can also add performances of class, gender, artist, gang member, intelligentsia (some of the audience consisted of art world patrons and scholars), ethnicity, race, etc. This is the group, the band; they are playing/creating together and apart simultaneously. There is discord and there is harmony, moments of transcendence and futility. No one quite knows what will happen next.

The contextual siting of *Nine* is paramount to the successfulness of the project. Barraza is both the frame and the content. As the context for the development and exhibition of the project, it functions as the physical location while also informing the conceptual parameters of the piece. Again, the dialectical relationship between the work of art and its siting, as a facet of the city as “living protagonist,” reappears and is critical to the works development, implementation and reception. The tensions between the two spheres work upon each other, building, deconstructing; the vectors of influence emanate in multiple directions. While they, as curators, posit this notion for the overall project, I believe it informs Alfaro’s project specifically. I have already discussed the dialectical nature of the collaborative process, and here I would like to extend this idea further towards the possibility of a similar relationship with the different conceptions of context that are at play within the piece.

As I stated previously, there are two conceptions of context that are of interest here: the physical and/or material conditions of the location and the conceptual (i.e. sociopolitical) dimensions of the work as it speaks to its various audiences. It is through this formulation of context-sensitivity that Alfaro constructs a relationship between the aesthetic terms of the work (specifically as a work of art, and not some other type of work), and the sociopolitical implications of engaging the inhabitants of Barraza in this project, thereby drawing attention to not only key issues that pertain to this section of the city but also its relation to other areas of the city (and perhaps even other cities as well). According to Alberto Gualde:

this work would not have the same significance outside of Barraza. Its extraordinary force lay in the context of its presentation, in shaping the event within the “risk zone” by the side of the protagonists. The force of *Nine* comes from using art to formulate

a specific dynamic within a specific context (and even for allowing vast areas susceptible to risk and unexpected irruptions).⁶⁴

Through this contextualization of the project, Alfaro complicates such issues as high and low art; private and public space; privileged and impoverished; power and powerlessness. And all the while he walks the tightrope of improvisation. Alfaro creates an open system, relinquishing much of his own artistic (authorial) control, while still asserting his own identity as the nexus point of the project. In this way, the contexts of Barraza were informed, deformed and reformed through the process of *Nine*.

Over the course of this analysis I have been alluding to the presence of various audiences for the work, both in its formative stages and in its two-night exhibition. In order to properly understand the transgressive nature of the piece, the different audiences must be addressed. Despite the risk of oversimplifying this discussion, I will delineate two specific audiences for this project: the inhabitants of Barraza—the community itself—and the art world patrons and practitioners. Here, again, tension reigned. Needless to say, Barraza is not a site on the city's artistic or cultural map. Most residents of the city themselves do not venture into the area without some pressing cause. Referring back to Gualde once again, the tension between the different audiences appears to be analogous to the ambiguities and tensions present in the work itself:

For many spectators who did not belong to the neighborhood, the mere fact of being there at all was already a violation, for being atypical, and for the danger it entailed: the closed street, the police presence, the dilapidated walls of the buildings as background for the projection... For the local residents, the excitement came from the invasion of their daily space, recontextualized, used as a space for an artistic creation, making them feel a mixture of fear, anticipation, and pride.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Alberto Gualde, "Nueve/Nine, Brooke Alfaro," in *ciudadMULTIPLEcity: Arte Panamá 2003*, ed. Gerardo Mosquera and Adrienne Samos (Amsterdam: KIT Publishers, 2004), 74.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

There is a structural analogy between the process and exhibition of the work and its reception. The same criteria by which I have been framing this analysis of Alfaro's project reemerge, but in a slightly different formulation: as between an art public and a social or community public. What is most important, however, is the recognition that these are not exclusive entities, that just as the work of art blends various forms, just as the context is a mixture of situations and attitudes, so too does one audience meld into the other, oscillating from pole to pole without any final resolution or definition.

Of the many projects created for *ciudadMULTIPLEcity*, Brooke Alfaro's project *Nine* stands out. This is the result of a number of important choices made by the artist. Particularly significant was his extended engagement with the community of Barraza, and his efforts towards collaboration with two rival gangs that otherwise would not occupy even the same sentence. Also of great significance is the fact that Alfaro did not set out to cure, rectify or solve some perceived problem through the course of his undertaking. In her review of the *ciudadMULTIPLEcity* for the art journal *Art Papers*, Cay Sophie Rabinowitz acknowledges that:

Offering no resolution to this district's problems, *Nine* contends that many programs masquerading as social reform are self-serving and futile. The art public enters a neighborhood thought off limits and dangerous and two rival gangs perform together, but the shooting resumes when the rehearsals end. Barraza remains, as ever, destitute, dangerous and divided.⁶⁶

This perspective may be a bit too cynical, to seemingly suggest that nothing has changed at all, that the entire process ends in futility. But it does convey the difficulty of ascertaining the actual value of such endeavors. I would argue that Alfaro's project is not simply a fleeting event without real meaning and significance for those involved. After all, it is

⁶⁶ Cay Sophie Rabinowitz, "Panama City, Panama," *Art Papers* 27, No. 4 (August 2003): 54.

exactly not the point to create some specific final outcome, some identifiable product for consumption (and waste). It is the process of creation, of reconfiguring relationships and developing a sense of ownership and agency that may otherwise be lacking for many marginalized individuals. Yet it does not end there, it is not a one-way street. That other audience, the art world, must also reassess their own sense of agency, purpose and position. Alfaro succeeds in his ability to immerse himself fully in the practices of collaboration and improvisation, in his ability to “address this contradictory pull between autonomy and social intervention, and reflect on this antinomy both in the structure of the work *and* in the conditions of its reception.”⁶⁷

Jesús Palomino: *Vendors and Squatters*, 2003

Akin to Brooke Alfaro’s project, the street installations by Spanish artist Jesús Palomino explore social boundaries within Panama City, but through an entirely different artistic process and collaborative model. Palomino’s constructions engaged issues of class, race, and marginality, along with their implicit social tensions as they play out daily in various spaces throughout the city. Collectively, these installations are titled *Vendors and Squatters*, 2003 [Plate 2.1-2], an overt reference to the informal markets and improvised living quarters of many of the city’s inhabitants. In fact, it is the very proliferation of these squatter communities within the larger city construct—the exponential growth of which are the result of ever-increasing urbanization and the history of Panama City as an important center for global exchange—that is largely the inspiration for the work itself.

⁶⁷ Claire Bishop, “The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents,” *Artforum* 44, No. 6 (February 2006): 183.

Upon arrival to Panama City, Palomino attests to the fact that he was “deeply impressed by the street markets and the makeshift informal structures built by the vendors themselves,” and thus his initial proposal for *ciudadMULTIPLEcity* “was to place a fictional market place on the streets of Panama City .”⁶⁸ Working closely with co-curator Gerardo Mosquera, Palomino eventually decided to fabricate a number of impromptu shelters/vendor stalls to be sited in strategically contentious or provocative locations throughout the city. The decision not to go so far as to create an entire market of stalls and shanties in a single location, instead opting for the use of multiple sites (experimenting with the different spaces of the urban environment), undoubtedly fueled the controversy that was to engulf these fabrications—a decision that further accentuated the illegality of many of these practices. Freestanding and discontinuous with their surroundings, these improvisational structures were not protected by a sense of security in numbers and were under daily threat of being dismantled or vandalized. In fact, a number of these structures were removed prematurely before the full run of the exhibition.⁶⁹ In an interesting reversal, it was the upper echelon of society that perpetuated such threats, perceiving these structures as unwanted incursions into their neatly manicured neighborhoods and commercial centers.

The lives of many of Panama City’s informal market vendors and squatter communities are defined by their very precariousness. With reference to their actual living conditions, then, it seems quite provocative that the spaces of their livelihood are also crafted from precarious, improvised materials. As such, the structure of the shanty takes on a largely symbolic meaning, itself the visual expression of the lives of those who reside and work

⁶⁸ Jesús Palomino, email to the author, February 17, 2009.

⁶⁹ Adrienne Samos, email to the author, March 26, 2009.

there, an embodiment of their uneasy position within societal life. Bennett Simpson stresses the intentional materiality of Palomino's structures, extending the aesthetic dimension of the work towards critique:

Palomino built a series of precarious, impromptu structures and sited them in parking lots, on the backs of apartment buildings and along avenues downtown. Fabricated from scrap materials, painted bright shades of blue or red, the structures resembled abandoned fruit stands or sun shelters. Like many of the works in the exhibition, the mock-shanties called attention to something official Panama may choose to ignore...⁷⁰

What emerges from this focus on materiality is the idea that the city, again, plays a central role in the creation of the works. In this case, the city quite literally lends itself to the fabrication of the installations by way of its own accumulation of debris. It is fundamental to the conceptual nature of the project that the very same materials and fabrication methods were used to create these structures. Here, there is a convergence of social consciousness and aesthetics. It is not merely important that Palomino used similar types of materials, but also the way in which he employed them with careful attention to the aesthetics of informal architecture and necessity. Co-curator and Director of Fundación Arte Panamá, Adrienne Samos notes:

The artist made them not only with the same materials that the poorest of the poor use to build their houses (pieces of wood or plastic, cardboard, cloth, rope and little more), but also with similar eyes and hands, given his intuitive handling of the many inherent possibilities—transparency and density, color and texture—of humble materials.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Bennett Simpson, "Multiple City: Arte Panama 2003," *Third Text* 17, No. 3 (Sept. 2003): 293.

⁷¹ Adrienne Samos, "Vendors and Squatters, Jesús Palomino," in *ciudadMULTIPLEcity: Arte Panamá 2003*, ed. Gerardo Mosquera and Adrienne Samos (Amsterdam: KIT Publishers, 2004), 146.

It is also important to note that the use of these materials and the construction of “mock-shanties” is an important and reoccurring element in much of Palomino’s artistic production. The project *Vendors and Squatters* was an extension of this pre-established interest in these kinds of forms and the sociopolitical divide that delineates the spaces, materiality and function of these structures.⁷² This point calls into question the extent to which Palomino drew his inspiration for the project from his direct experiences of the city, or whether perhaps he was selected from the outset with the understanding that his work would pursue this pre-established line of inquiry.

Yet, there was a marked difference between the street installations in Panama City and his other, previous fabrications: the project for *ciudadMULTIPLEcity* was the first instance in which these structures were created in situ, outside of the museum or gallery context. This is important for a number of reasons. The provocation of these structures, situated in very specific public spaces, contrasted greatly with the more commonly indifferent and/or contemplative responses to these works within gallery walls. In turn, revealing “the extent to which such ‘neutral’ spaces sap the critical and social implications of art.”⁷³ The reactions and responses that *Vendors and Squatters* received were anything but benign, and they came from multiple angles and with varying ferocity. While Palomino himself was not present for the entire duration of the project, and subsequently only learned of the controversy surrounding his work through second hand sources, he admitted that he

⁷² Craig Garrett, “Multiple City: Panamá 2003, Fundación Arte Panamá,” *Art Nexus* 2, No. 49 (August 2003): 94.

⁷³ Adrienne Samos, “Vendors and Squatters, Jesús Palomino,” in *ciudadMULTIPLEcity: Arte Panamá 2003*, ed. Gerardo Mosquera and Adrienne Samos (Amsterdam: KIT Publishers, 2004), 141.

had not foreseen the kind of heated debate that emerged as a result of his work, on the streets of the city and in the media.⁷⁴

So why did this work cause such a commotion? What were the stakes of the debate? Who did it affect most directly, and how? The art critic Craig Garrett, writing for the journal *Art Nexus*, throws the controversy into relief:

removed from their gallery context, these delicate structures of paper, plastic sheeting and other ephemeral materials hit upon one of the unique features of Panama City: the sharp divide between property owners—the main beneficiaries of the nation's trade-based open market economy—and the disenfranchised families who struggle to scrape together a living in virtually the same physical space.⁷⁵

It is the very nature of squatting and informal economic ventures to inhabit spaces within the city that are abandoned, interstitial or that are otherwise relegated to disuse. Despite being illegal practices, the enforcement of anti-squatting and sidewalk vending laws is often sporadic and inconsistent, eventually allowing many of such endeavors to become semi-permanent. More often than not, the enforcement of these regulations is carried out only when these structures cross some socioeconomic line, and this has everything to do with visibility and proximity. As long as these individuals stay out of sight and out of certain neighborhoods, they are tolerated (even if begrudgingly).

Palomino's project exposes this situation, recreates and highlights it. His work is an intervention of sorts, performing a critique of the social values imposed from the top-down within the city, but a critique in which the artist is also implicated. Interestingly enough,

⁷⁴ Jesús Palomino, email to the author, February 17, 2009.

⁷⁵ Craig Garrett, "Multiple City: Panamá 2003, Fundación Arte Panamá," *Art Nexus* 2, No. 49 (August 2003): 94.

Palomino has been appropriating squatter practices and techniques as part of his artistic repertoire for some time, and it has become a kind of trademark of his artistic identity. Furthermore, Palomino expressed little to no interest in actually engaging the people for whom the issues his work illuminated are most dire. Thus, the collaboration that took place did so in the absence of the artist, without direct interaction. Admittedly, this was somewhat of a problem for me at first, the recognition of which exposed my own ethical tendencies. I felt that it was rather irresponsible for him to address this set of practices and the constituency of individuals that most often utilize them without direct confrontation. In short, I expected (or desired) complicity. But why is this important? In the end the work did a great deal to catalyze numerous discussions about the issues that were at the core of its aesthetic and socio-politico-economic nature. So why would it matter if Palomino sat down and talked with any of the sides involved? Why would I only want him to engage the squatters themselves?

Moving along, the locations that Palomino selected as sites for the development of the installations were also of great importance—a process that was apparently quite arduous and required the aid of a number of further collaborators and urban guides.⁷⁶ In the end, three contexts were chosen, each with its own unique set of conditions, or contingent factors. These three locations included a vacant field that had been set aside and was awaiting real-estate development (which, in fact, occurred two weeks prior to the end of the exhibition, and wherein Palomino's work there was demolished prematurely by a construction crane);⁷⁷ the

⁷⁶ Jesús Palomino, email to the author, February 18, 2009.

⁷⁷ Adrienne Samos, "Vendors and Squatters, Jesús Palomino," in *ciudadMULTIPLEcity: Arte Panamá 2003*, ed. Gerardo Mosquera and Adrienne Samos (Amsterdam: KIT Publishers, 2004), 146.

parking lot of an apartment complex; and an upscale shopping center, La Maison Dante, known for its sale of luxury goods and high-class patronage. The majority of the controversy erupted over the presence of the interconnected shanty structures that occupied the same space as the luxury boutiques, and it was through this context (again, I use this term to suggest physical space as well as psychological space) that the two extremes of upper and lower class within Panama City came into direct conflict.

In this respect, Palomino's project operates in a similar fashion as Alfaro's work, creating a forum for the inclusion of many different voices, and a space within and through which marginalized voices are given new stock. Furthermore, the tensions upon which society is structured were exposed and engaged. However, Palomino's approach was very different from the embedded yearlong process that Alfaro pursued; but this is not necessarily a value judgment. The collaborative process is anything but formulaic, and part of my own reasoning for selecting Palomino's work for analysis is precisely to approach the idea of collaboration from a different perspective. The concepts of collaboration and improvisation remain critical, and critically distinct. In recent email correspondence with the artist I proposed the notions of collaboration and improvisation as critical frames for the analysis of his work. His response took me somewhat by surprise. According to him, the collaborative working experience in the research and development of the project was rather conventional—more of a matter of logistical problem-solving and resource procurement, and not the highly charged process of contention and debate that I have previously outlined. However, in his description of how the collaboration could have been more successful he acknowledged the importance of giving “the collaborators the chance of feeling themselves part of the action”

through “a very open and non-hierarchical group spirit.”⁷⁸ What is most interesting is how this sense of collaborative, group spirit arose over the course of the exhibition: how different collective bodies of solidarity coalesced through the reception of the work in the public domain, rather than through the process of the work’s development.

The concept of improvisation is also at the core of Palomino’s working method, along with the notions of bricolage, emergency and enjoyment.⁷⁹ With regard to Alfaro, the discussion of improvisation focused primarily on the working methodology employed by the artist in his research and development of the project, as well as to the event-like nature of the video projections. In Palomino’s case, however, the idea of improvisation operates more on an aesthetic or conceptual level.⁸⁰ The conceptual dimensions of *Vendors and Squatters* hinge on the nature of these two related practices, and, appropriately, Palomino develops an aesthetic of adaptability and improvisation to correspond to the physicality of the constructions, their contextual siting, and the underlying sociopolitical issues. In fact, there are many layers of bricolage within this project: from the procurement and use of materials to the varied audiences and divergent responses to the work.

For *ciudadMULTIPLEcity*, Palomino and his team of workers—local artists, urban theorists from the University, a local carpenter by the name of Victor—performed the work of vendors and squatters through the assembly and construction of the three different structures. Through this performativity, Palomino’s livelihood (that is, his artistic career, trajectory and reputation) became interwoven with those of the individuals whose practices

⁷⁸ Jesús Palomino, email to the author, February 18, 2009.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

he was referencing. In a symbolic fashion, Palomino was also scraping together the means necessary for his own survival. Yet, the stakes were hardly the same: in the collaborative process, the artist retains a privileged position—a sense of autonomy—while simultaneously submitting this autonomy to the vulnerability of multiple sources of input. Palomino constructed a situation and then walked away, allowing the work to adapt and be adapted to the different arguments and staked claims. It is also important to note that Palomino was permitted to place these structures in their various contexts once an agreement had been reached with the site owners of each, and, more importantly, because they were (just) works of art. But this was the great sleight-of-hand performed by Palomino, after all, whereby art transforms reality, becomes more real than life itself by inciting action and debates that otherwise remain unarticulated.

Istanbul Calling

Since the late 1980s and early 90s, the international biennial model has proliferated at exponential rates. Currently, there are some 140 different biennial exhibitions in operation worldwide.⁸¹ In observation of these staggering statistics, there is no question that the biennial complex has significantly contributed to the reshaping of the contemporary art world—the effects of which have largely influenced the formats for the display of contemporary art practices as well as in guiding artistic production itself, with many more artists working to develop project proposals for such exhibitions rather than creating autonomous art objects.⁸² The ever-growing prevalence of biennial exhibitions has been met with both praise and frustration. On the one hand, many of the recent biennials have cropped up in areas of the world that have hitherto existed outside of the “official” contemporary art world—as guided by Euro-American-centrist perspectives—and have drawn much-needed attention to artists and practices beyond the insularity and relative homogeneity of “First World” art institutions. On the other hand, many of these exhibitions fail to represent a critical alterity to both their own structures and histories, as well as to the global mainstream. Much criticism has been leveled at these temporary, episodic institutions on the basis of their function as closed loop circuits, within which the same curators, artists, works of art, and critics circulate.

Enter the International Istanbul Biennial. Commenced in 1987, the Istanbul Biennial is approaching its 11th incarnation under the curatorial guidance of What, How, and For

⁸¹ Marieke van Hal, “Opening Remarks” (paper presented at the Biennials in Dialogue Conference, Shanghai, China, September 6-7, 2008).

⁸² Biljana Ciric, introduction to *Rejected Collection* (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 2008), 8.

Whom, the curatorial collective based in Zagreb, Croatia. Over the years the biennial has struggled, like many of its counterparts, to develop a coherent identity and purpose both within and between its local and global frameworks. In a recent text published for *Framework: The Finnish Art Review*, curator and critic Mika Hannula suggested that part of the problem with biennials has to do with their disjunctive temporality, the constant turnover from one edition to the next. Hannula asserts that “[o]ne of the main problems is the one-off character of biennials. As long as every newly appointed curator tries to reinvent the wheel again and again, there is no way out of this self-made misery.”⁸³ The problem is not so much the temporality of these types of exhibitions, but, as successive productions, there is often little attempt to build upon or learn from their own historical trajectory, let alone from other biennials from diverse locations.

Whether acknowledged or not, each biennial edition develops in relation to its predecessors, and its success or failure is often related to its handling of previous flaws. In this schema, then, the focus should not merely be on an increase in biennial attendance, for instance, but on the quality and interactivity of the exhibition in engaging both local and international audiences. In fact, it should be noted that at the core of any biennial exhibition are many of the same criteria that I have outlined for this analysis. The primary concerns of biennials, I would argue, as exhibitions of contemporary art that also serve to engage a local socio-cultural scene that extends beyond the arts, should involve a more careful tailoring and interweaving of aesthetic and sociopolitical qualities. Furthermore, the fear of critique and of taking a self-critical stance (which involves sifting through the past, accepting mistakes)

⁸³ Mika Hannula, “New Hope for the Dead: 9th International Istanbul Biennial Gives a Necessary Boost to an Old Concept,” *Framework*, http://www.framework.fi/4_2005/news/artikkelit/hannula.html.

should not prevent a more genuine and concerted approach to such pursuits. Far too often, the potency of a biennial's sociopolitical address is co-opted for purposes of cultural tourism and commercialism, among other things. So how does the 9th International Istanbul Biennial, which took place between the 16th of September and October 30th of 2005, fit into this scenario? What were the strategies employed by co-curators Vasif Kortun and Charles Esche in order to circumnavigate the pitfalls of the biennial syndrome?

Rejecting the idea of the biennial as an exhibition model, Kortun posits the biennial project as “a format linked both to the diversification and enrichment of the field on the one hand and on the other the cultural empowerment and legitimation of the city it takes place in.”⁸⁴ Here one can read a concerted effort to more directly connect the Biennial to the specificity of its location and its history. By turning inwards it also seeks to define those connecting points that provide access beyond its immediate context. Under the direction of Kortun and Esche, the 9th International Istanbul Biennial addressed both the 18-year history of the Biennial as well as the modern history of Istanbul the city. In ways that will be divulged momentarily, many of the decisions made by Kortun and Esche were made in response to key aspects of the institution's history, developing a contemplative approach to the present situation of Istanbul within global politics. Overall, the Biennial was the result of thoughtful reflection on the purpose of the exhibition, and the location of the city within “a specific geo-political reality,”⁸⁵ all of which led to a new proposition. Put quite simply, but no less powerfully, this proposition was embodied by the exhibition's title: *Istanbul*.

⁸⁴ Minna Henriksson, “The World Can Be Transformed by Action,” 9th International Istanbul Biennial, <http://www.iksv.org/bienal/bienal9/english/?Page=Curators&Sub=Interview&Content=4>.

⁸⁵ Katerina Gregos, “Email Interview with Vasif Kortun and Charles Esche,” 9th International Istanbul Biennial,

Just as Panama City took center stage in the production of *ciudadMULTIPLEcity*, so did Istanbul function as a critical focus for the 9th edition of the Istanbul Biennial. In order to aid in this analysis of the exhibition, some characterization of the city is necessary. Having never traveled to Istanbul myself, I am obliged to rely on the notions of the city offered by the curators, critics and artists who work most closely with and in this context. The positioning of Istanbul as a protagonist is even more provocative when one considers *how* the city is characterized—what attributes are selected and highlighted—as such emphasis surely reveals some of the core values that were being mulled over throughout the development and realization of the Biennial. Charles Esche has described Istanbul as a “predictive city to challenge the idea that it is somehow following an already trod path towards US style global modern capitalism.” The development of Istanbul is especially marked by a sense of improvisation, wherein one can find

a form of agonistic living together in which people survive, continue, and prosper without a fundamental agreement on the pattern of society. It serves as a concrete form of what Chantal Mouffe has called an ‘agonistic public sphere,’ though the publicness of that sphere is constantly under threat from rich families and from privatization... Working in the city is inspiring because of the possibility it creates.⁸⁶

The idea of Istanbul as a “predictive city” is predicated on its rapid modernization, and its existence outside of—but still very much connected to—the direct influence of Western-style capitalism. Rather than following in the footsteps of European or American industrialization and modernization, many theorists contend that cities like Istanbul are developing in decisively different ways, embodying (rather chaotic) models of spatial construction—which

<http://www.iksv.org/bienal/bienal9/english/?Page=Curators&Sub=Interview&Content=3>.

⁸⁶ Jelena Vesic, “About Exhibitions, Modest Proposals and Possibilities: Interview with Charles Esche,” Prelom Kolektiv, http://www.prelomkolektiv.org/pdf/esche_e.pdf.

seeps into the resultant social structure—that challenge the rigidity of the highly rationalized organizational models that have descended from the European Enlightenment and their American counterparts.

Generally speaking, there is no singular urban plan for Istanbul’s development—no figures like Georges-Eugène Haussmann (Paris) or Daniel Burnham (Chicago)—no “fundamental agreement on the pattern of society.” But this extends beyond mere physical layout, as Istanbul is also an “agonistic” conglomerate of various histories (Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman, etc.), shifting migratory populations, and cultural forms. The city itself is a bridge between “East” and “West.” As Patricia Phillips points out, “Istanbul is continentally bifurcated. Southeast of the Bosphorus, the city is Asian. To the northwest, it is in Europe. It is Islamic and Christian, traditionally authoritarian with an emerging secular democracy.”⁸⁷ These simplified binaries convey a sense of the dynamic tensions that make Istanbul such a remarkable place, and it is from such agonistic societal relations that much of the work for the 9th International Istanbul Biennial drew its inspiration, engaging the city and its various subjects in order to draft a sketch of its multiple forms. Beyond its national borders, this situating of Turkey as a point of multiple positions has taken center stage in European politics as Turkey is currently under consideration for acceptance into the EU. And as Phillips suggests, “[t]he characteristics that distinguish Istanbul and Turkey are exactly the ones that make some E.U. members skeptical of, if not alarmed by, the prospect of its role in European politics.”⁸⁸ This current political tension was also responded to through certain aspects of the curatorial framework that sought to create tenuous

⁸⁷ Patricia Phillips, “9th International Istanbul Biennial,” *Sculpture* 25, No. 3 (April 2006): 78.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

relationships between Istanbul and other major cities on both sides of the European border, thereby giving form to the multiple (in)congruencies between the different locations.

It is not surprising, then, that Kortun and Esche chose the city itself as the primary theme or concept for the Biennial. Istanbul was the starting point, and from there the city—the idea—spiraled outwards throughout the region.⁸⁹ In an interview preceding the opening of the exhibition, Kortun and Esche discussed their interest in the context of Istanbul with Katrina Gregos. In response to her labeling of their work as socio-politically engaged, the co-curators responded by opening the reading of the works and overall exhibition even further: “the context of the show is the city—not only its ‘socio-political’ aspect, but its people, their intimacy and emotion, the street life, the smell, the colours—amongst much else that the artists will reveal to us.”⁹⁰ While not stated so overtly, I read in this statement an acknowledgement of the importance of the aesthetic qualities of the city, and some suggestion of ways that the artists and works of art may translate certain aesthetic qualities of the city itself into visible forms. This articulation offers an interesting point to consider with regard to the interactivity of the aesthetic and sociopolitical qualities of the city and the works. Previously I have argued for a duality that, while layered, is still composed of two separate, seemingly autonomous forms of expression. Here, I am interested in proposing a slightly different relationship, whereby the aesthetic and the sociopolitical occupy the same continuum, that they do not merely reinforce or accentuate one another, but perhaps are one and the same. In other words, the aesthetic qualities of the city—“intimacy and emotion, the

⁸⁹ Jan Verwoert, “City Report: Istanbul,” *frieze* 95 (Nov.-Dec. 2005): 127.

⁹⁰ Katerina Gregos, “Email Interview with Vasif Kortun and Charles Esche,” 9th International Istanbul Biennial, <http://www.iksv.org/bienal/bienal9/english/?Page=Curators&Sub=Interview&Content=3>.

street life, the smell, the colours,” for example—are also sociopolitical forms of address. Esche and Kortun reject the idea of one or another interpretation, asserting the indivisibility of these qualities.

Another critical aspect of the curatorial methodology is the selection of the different sites for the exhibition, as well as what is not selected (or relied upon). Seven different buildings were utilized for the display of the artworks, only one of which was an art center,⁹¹ with the further addition of a section of the exhibition entitled “En Route,” which consisted of works displayed in the public avenues that crisscrossed between locations. Again, having been unable to experience the exhibition for myself, I must rely on the accounts of others, and in this regard I find Patricia Phillips’ description quite poignant.

All within walking distance of each other, the different venues encouraged visitors to make and enact their own maps of the city. The skein of random routes that emerged as people went from place to place was a vivid part of the experiential and conceptual core of this biennial project. The venues, unpredictably connected and interrupted by this spatial navigation, created an engaging disequilibrium and disquieting arrhythmia of often segregated experiences of art with the erratic pulse of quotidian activities and dramatic urban change.⁹²

The selection of these sites was quite purposeful in the sense that Kortun and Esche deliberately avoided the historical, touristic sites that were the epicenters of past biennials, instead opting to contextualize the exhibition within the working-class, industrial districts of Beyoglu and Galata. Speaking with Minna Henriksson, Charles Esche explains: “we decided to avoid the pitfalls of Ottoman nostalgia kitsch—or at best the notion of the historic city

⁹¹ The sites of the exhibition included the Deniz Palas Apartments, the Garanti Building, Antrepo No. 5, a Tobacco Warehouse, the Bilsar Building, Platform Garanti Contemporary Art Center, and the Garibaldi Building.

⁹² Patricia Phillips, “9th International Istanbul Biennial,” *Sculpture* 25, No. 3 (April 2006): 78.

providing spurious legitimacy to contemporary work, a thing that has disfigured a number of previous biennials. So, we will use only relatively recent buildings and sites that are either domestic or associated with contemporary trade and production... The idea is to lay out a walking route in the city, with larger and smaller stations along the way.” As such, Kortun suggests that the idea is “to sink the biennial into the city and make it continuous with it.”⁹³

However, despite their objective to develop a continuous biennial experience, with the city operating as a kind of work of art in its own right, significant criticism was leveled at the Biennial for its limited presence within the public domain. Only four of the works in the exhibition were actually located outside of some mediating structure, and there appears to have been a favoring of objects and the quarantined displays of video works and installations. This point is further complicated by the fact that, while the curators clearly attempted to position many of the works outside of neutral, white cube gallery spaces, access to the informal displays prevalent in the warehouse-like structures or abandoned, transitional apartment complexes still required the payment of an admission price.⁹⁴ The art critic T.J. Demos, writing for *Artforum*, provides some insightful critique:

Where the curatorial strategy ran into trouble was in its dependence on the legibility of the disjunctions set up between exhibition venues and the spaces of everyday life. Exiting the venues, one encountered a culture shock—which was not unintended, as one of the curators informed me. But while making the visitor experience the sometimes-gaping cultural divisions between genteel art-viewing and the drudgery of manual labor in a developing city, which hopefully prompts introspection and self-estrangement, the curious lack of mediation between the two irreconcilable zones

⁹³ Minna Henriksson, “The World Can Be Transformed by Action,” 9th International Istanbul Biennial, <http://www.iksv.org/bienal/bienal9/english/?Page=Curators&Sub=Interview&Content=4>.

⁹⁴ Eleanor Heartney, “Report from Istanbul: Artists in the City,” *Art in America* 93, No. 11 (December 2005): 55.

highlighted the rather conventional object-based appearance of the majority of artworks, nearly all of which were safely contained behind walls.⁹⁵

While the selection of the different sites was meaningful in disrupting certain biennial conventionalities, apparently there remained a lack of adventurousness with regard to the opening up and exploration of the public realm. It is evident how Kortun and Esche created (at times, agonistic) relationships between the different spaces, between the abandoned or transitional building structures and the chaos of urban street environments, but this seems to have fallen short of its desired interactivity due to the sheltering of most of the works on display. The 9th International Istanbul Biennial undoubtedly offered a much needed revamping of biennial exhibitions, both within and outside of Turkey, but it also reveals some of the nagging limitations that continue to plague these types of exhibitions, the problems that continue to face “anti-biennial biennials.”⁹⁶

Presently, I would like to delve more deeply into the curatorial framework and methodology. To begin with, the curatorial team consisted of the two aforementioned co-curators, Vasif Kortun and Charles Esche, with the accompaniment of two assistant curators, November Paynter and Esra Sarigedik. It is important to add that each of the team members, aside from Esche (who is the current director of the van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, NL), live and work in Istanbul; circumstances that surely helped to situate the Biennial within the fabric of the city—its physical sitings and conceptual parameters. The working methodology was described in an email interview with art journal *Metropolis M* as “organic,” wherein “the

⁹⁵ T.J. Demos, “9th International Istanbul Biennial,” *Artforum* 44, No. 3 (November 2005): 246.

⁹⁶ Eleanor Heartney, “Report from Istanbul: Artists in the City,” *Art in America* 93, No. 11 (December 2005): 55.

hierarchies dissolved along the way.” Of particular interest is the assertion that the different practitioners would “test each other’s decisions, choices and preferences at all stages and seek to strengthen them through discussion.”⁹⁷ I am drawn to this description for reasons that should be obvious by now, specifically as it highlights a kind of working through of oppositions that ultimately leads to a greater productivity and accountability for the choices made. Yet, it remains unclear just how this kind of collaborative practice played out in actuality. I cannot but wonder as to how the power dynamics shape and influence the working process, how the notion of a quasi-governing curatorium—a bureaucracy of sorts—influences the shape and direction of the project.

Having already touched upon the selection of sites for the display of artworks, there are a number of other important strategies adopted by the curators to explore the myriad of facets that are subsumed under the title “Istanbul.” Again, adapting a mixture of scattered sites, artists’ residencies and the commissioning of new works, Charles Esche explains the curatorial framework:

we decided to reduce the overall number of artists to about 50, to show more work by each individual, and ask around half of the selected artists to come for an extended residency in Istanbul (2-6 months) to produce new work or choose existing work that would address the sensibility of the city itself. As a countervailing force, and to avoid the dangers of a kind of Istanbul essentialism, the other half will be showing work that contrasts with the environment and the condition of Istanbul, telling other stories or experiences from other parts of the international imagination.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Metropolis M, “Email Interview with Charles Esche and Vasif Kortun,” 9th International Istanbul Biennial, <http://www.iksv.org/bienal/bienal9/english/?Page=Curators&Sub=Interview&Content=1>.

⁹⁸ Minna Henriksson, “The World Can Be Transformed by Action,” 9th International Istanbul Biennial, <http://www.iksv.org/bienal/bienal9/english/?Page=Curators&Sub=Interview&Content=4>.

Elsewhere, this distinction between the two poles of the exhibition is described as works that engage Istanbul and works about “Not-Istanbul.”⁹⁹ Istanbul is thus the central axis for interpretation in both cases, and yet another dialectical pairing emerges. Through this duality, there are multiple investigations of Istanbul: its internal dynamics and heterogeneous forms as well as with regard to its external relationships with the regions that it straddles. Thus, Istanbul is explored as here and there, as well as elsewhere. Combating the pitfalls of previous editions and other biennials across the globe, T.J. Demos commends this aspect of the 9th International Istanbul Biennial:

overall the biennial managed to avoid the potential dangers of geographical essentialism or limited parochialism by diversifying its conception of site—and this was a sign of the exhibition’s complex ambitions: The organizers posited Istanbul as a relay between locality and globality, where globalization was encountered as a lived process mediating between a real place and the forces that move through it, between one’s actual location and the discourses that determine or are inflected by it.¹⁰⁰

The relationship between the global and the local has attracted a great deal of attention in recent writing in art circles, almost to the point of exhaustion. However, it seems to have been received favorably here, and thus it will be interesting to assess just how this divide was handled, or bridged. The two projects that I have selected for analysis speak to the different sides of this debate, and I hope that between the two of them some sense of the “glocal” can be established in a productive and informative way. In part, the successfulness of the Biennial in addressing this issue is founded on the fact that it never lost sight of the local

⁹⁹Metropolis M, “Email Interview with Charles Esche and Vasif Kortun,” 9th International Istanbul Biennial, <http://www.iksv.org/bienal/bienal9/english/?Page=Curators&Sub=Interview&Content=1>.

¹⁰⁰T.J. Demos, “9th International Istanbul Biennial,” *Artforum* 44, No. 3 (November 2005): 245-6.

context, and instead attempted to access global perspectives through a close reading of local ties, processes and negotiations of power.

Finally, before moving on to a discussion of works within the show, I am compelled to address an important methodological problem I have encountered with regard to this case study. Unlike the case of *ciudadMULTIPLEcity*, where I was able to establish contact with the artists and curators, this first-hand knowledge is largely absent in the case of the 9th International Istanbul Biennial. There is no doubt in my mind that the following section, regarding the analysis of the works of art and their points of receptions (their ability to activate and empower), would profit greatly from such input. Overall, I personally recognize my lack of intimacy with these works and their working methodologies. This is perhaps somewhat contradictory to my own argument: one that largely serves to promote active participation as a means for revelatory experience. Furthermore, I largely agree with Charles Esche when he states that “art is always an intimate experience that talks to the individual and about individual experience.”¹⁰¹ However, despite the discomfort I have in engaging these works in such a tenuous fashion, I still believe it to be a worthwhile pursuit, and will try to overcome these methodological hindrances as best I can.

Karl-Heinz Klopf: *Mind the Steps*, 2005

Despite the imbalance of truly public works of art in the Biennial, there are two projects from the “En Route” section that involve such practices and it is on them that I will focus. The first project to be discussed is *Mind the Steps*, 2005 [Plate 3], by Austrian artist

¹⁰¹Jelena Vesic, “About Exhibitions, Modest Proposals and Possibilities: Interview with Charles Esche,” Prelom Kolektiv, http://www.prelomkolektiv.org/pdf/esche_e.pdf.

Karl-Heinz Klopff. Klopff has been investigating issues of urbanism and architecture for quite some time, following the different paths of analysis as part of an artistic practice focused primarily on the informal structures and networks that currently shape the “predictive” cities of today. An important part of this practice deals with the relationship between urbanism (its everyday practice) and economic forces, a relationship ripe with inconsistencies that result from the exertion of multiple desires, all of which is quite particular to the city of Istanbul. His participation in the 9th edition of the Istanbul Biennial resulted from his prolonged interest in and travels to Istanbul, and the research related to it that he has been conducting for years. Co-curators Vasif Kortun and Charles Esche explain part of their criteria for the selection of artists, describing how “[a] number of artists were invited following their own longstanding connections with the city through residency experiences, deep personal interest and research.” Karl-Heinz Klopff was a prime candidate in this regard, as he “has been visiting Istanbul on and off for years and his extremely site-specific proposal reflects this extended period of observation.”¹⁰² Thankfully, Klopff has published his proposal on his website, and it reveals much of his interest and working process for this project.

Mind the Steps is a subtle and muted intervention within the hillside walkways and staircases that pepper the steep streets of the Beyoglu neighborhood, leading to and from the area known as the Golden Horn on the Bosphorus. The work consisted of the selection of six different sites along these tumultuous corridors, for which Klopff installed theatrical projector spots to illuminate these locations at night. Finally, over the course of the first week of the Biennial, Klopff invited local artists, musicians, informal day laborers, and other people from

¹⁰²Metropolis M, “Email Interview with Charles Esche and Vasif Kortun,” 9th International Istanbul Biennial, <http://www.iksv.org/bienal/bienal9/english/?Page=Curators&Sub=Interview&Content=1>.

the neighborhood to “perform” their services or craft at one of the selected locations. For this work, the artist drew inspiration from a number of different sources, and in his proposal he cites a text by Austrian-born American social historian, educator, architect and writer Bernard Rudofsky entitled *Streets for People*, which, according to Klopff, stated that “climbing stairs had become an atavistic activity for modern industrialized man.”¹⁰³ While Rudofsky was writing in reference to the city of Rome, Klopff understood this daily activity to be a pertinent subject for inquiry in the hillside neighborhoods of Istanbul, a city that is also constructed on a number of steep shelves. In these rather simple but provocative constructions, Klopff caught a glimpse of “Istanbul”—the physicality of its location, the idea:

As a result of the intersection of steep streets and the horizontal of buildings, extreme differences of heights are created in the pavement area, which pedestrians have to surmount... It can easily be seen that these steps have mostly been built without planning. The materials, colors and constellations are very different. Whatever was at hand was used. Ergonomic necessities were mostly only roughly considered. Sometimes there are entire ensembles of differently high and long steps, which were constructed in a playful and improvised way. These patchwork-like details can be considered as miniaturized metaphors of the constructed Istanbul.¹⁰⁴

The notion that these constructions metaphorically represent the urban environment of Istanbul, with its many psychological underpinnings, is not only very poetic, in my opinion, but also quite profound. These often overlooked staircases, used each and every day by residents, workers, and tourists alike, are physical incarnations of the “agonistic public sphere” that Esche referred to—sites around and through which various interpretations of how Istanbul should be constructed (in service to certain notions of “who” Istanbul is)

¹⁰³Karl-Heinz Klopff, “Mind the Steps,” expand, <http://www.expand.at/klopff/>.

¹⁰⁴Ibid.

literally confront one another, creating a visual analogy of the society that treads its labyrinthine passageways on a daily basis.

Klopf's interest in the aesthetic qualities of these constructions should not be overlooked here, as they are absolutely pertinent to the overall nature of the work and further corroborate the sociopolitical address of *Mind the Steps*. The uses of different materials, the different colors and variations in heights, lengths and widths of the ill-fitted steps can be understood as descriptions of a society that itself is a blending of racial, ethnic, religious, and cultural identities. The differentiation of steps is analogical to the differentiation of subject positions that they themselves are referents of. Each intervention is a statement of intent, an expression of a belief. In this way, *Mind the Steps* functions as a kind of forum for debate. However, it is a debate that is long in the making and never quite finished, and the reach of this debate extends far beyond the immediate work of art, perhaps even existing outside of it. The steps, then, are a kind of readymade, awaiting recontextualization—a Duchampian twist of fate. After all, as Vasif Kortun points out in his description of the work, “Karl-Heinz Klopf has made nothing for the Biennial.”¹⁰⁵ Thus, the work of art is not the catalyst for this kind of interactivity and exchange, but an identification and contribution to this dialogue.

All of these characteristics are emphasized even more provocatively by the literal and figural “illuminating” of the six sites selected by the artist, through the use of theatrical projector spotlights, thereby creating a kind of stage set in each location. These sites were in fact quite ironic in the sense that they were rather mundane, while also drawing one's attention in an ultimately ambiguous direction. Kortun explains how “[t]hese subtle

¹⁰⁵Vasif Kortun, “Karl-Heinz Klopf,” 9th International Istanbul Biennial, http://www.iksv.org/bienal/bienal9/english/?Page=Artists&Sub=Az&Content=KarlHeinz_Klopf.

indicators are contexts for things waiting to happen. Invisible to oblivious passers-by during the day, these carefully selected moments become visible, like the stars, only at night.”¹⁰⁶ At this point, one may wonder how or in what way these works were collaborative in nature, wherein various constituencies negotiate the territory of their identities. In part, I believe that the issue of collaboration was raised through Klopff’s interaction with the city itself—here the idea that the city is an integral protagonist, a living entity to be engaged, returns. In *Mind the Steps*, Klopff operates as kind of semiotician, exploring and drawing attention to the signs that the city holds, and uses curatorial techniques—for instance, lighting and the intertwining of relationships in order to create a composition—to develop a work of art ripe for multifarious interpretations. Klopff does not merely take the information provided by the city as given, but augments and accentuates it in ways that challenge the very everydayness of such information.

But it does not end there. There is yet another crucial aspect of the project in which the issue of collaboration comes to the forefront, and resonates with the idea of a work of art functioning as a site reminiscent of a political forum, albeit in a very theatrical and disjointed fashion. As I mentioned previously, the “stage sets” created by the use of the projector spotlights on the steps became sites for a variety of different performances and events that took place over the course of the opening week of the Biennial. Each night, at a different location along the route mapped out by Klopff along the corridors of Beyoglu, performers from the local community would take the stage, inviting passers-by to become involved in

¹⁰⁶Vasif Kortun, “Karl-Heinz Klopff,” 9th International Istanbul Biennial, http://www.iksv.org/bienal/bienal9/english/?Page=Artists&Sub=Az&Content=KarlHeinz_Klopff.

their respective performances. Writing for the art journal *Springerin*, art critic Pelin Tan describes these performances, explaining how

Klopf transformed the daily habits of walking in the streets into a playful performance. During the Biennial, he not only used spotlights to highlight these chaotic steps like stages, but also organized shows by several local musicians and performers on every evening during the first week of the show. At the first event, which was on a set of steps in front of a cash dispenser in Hacı Ali Street, two Turkish artists performed by creating rhythms using their hands and bodies. Another day, the steps in Yeni Çarşı Street hosted local break and rap dancers. Gypsy musicians and dancers were invited to the steps in Türkgücü Street and a local electronic music group was invited to Horoz Street on another evening.¹⁰⁷

On an aesthetic level, these performances contributed to the urban fabric of the city, an experience than was heightened by the fact that such events were generally daytime rituals. They were contradictory in nature: both out of place and yet not entirely foreign, while also representative of the diverse identities that inhabit the neighborhood. The choice of performers operated on both an aesthetic plane as well as contributing significantly to the sociopolitical issues that were imbued within the project. The musical forms were representative of different classes of citizens, many of which also had different cultural backgrounds. The publicness of these spaces was thus explored, perhaps even opened up slightly. They became spaces to engage different identities and performances of identity, ultimately questioning the publicness of such displays and their communicability or lack thereof. For misunderstanding is always an intrinsic aspect of the communicative act.

Pelin Tan goes on to make a very interesting point with regard to this idea, observing that “[t]he collaboration with local musicians and performers from different cultural

¹⁰⁷Pelin Tan, “Encountering the Local,” *Springerin*,
<http://www.springerin.at/dyn/heft.php?id=45&pos=0&textid=0&lang=en>.

communities not only created interactive street interventions in the public space that involved both the audience and local people, but also produced a kind of trans-local experience and knowledge among the inhabitants.”¹⁰⁸ While not directly engaging one another, these performances created a sense of awareness within the neighborhood that revealed a multiplicity of voices. To return to the idea of an aesthetics of communication as one of the primary and critical attributes of socially engaged, collaborative art practices, Klopf’s critical attention paid to the drawing together of highly charged cultural vocalizations created a kind of call and response among the local residents and extended this beyond the neighborhood through its inclusion as part of the Biennial structure. *Mind the Steps*, then, involved the dual processes of visualization and vocalization, enacting the very struggle to be both seen and heard.

SUPERFLEX & Jens Haaning: *1000 biennial posters project*, 2005

The second project I will discuss did not take place in Istanbul at all. Still designated as one of the works of art in the “En Route” section, the project by Danish art collective SUPERFLEX, in collaboration with fellow Danish artist Jens Haaning, is an example of a “Not-Istanbul” project. This is the result of the artists’ displacement of their project to Copenhagen, Denmark, the city in which they all live and work. As the title suggests, *1000 biennial posters project*, 2005 [Plate 4], entailed the shipping of 1000 Biennial posters to Copenhagen, where they were then posted throughout the city alongside the thousands of other advertisements and promotional posters that together create a kind of urban wallpaper

¹⁰⁸Pelin Tan, “Encountering the Local,” Springerin,
<http://www.springerin.at/dyn/heft.php?id=45&pos=0&textid=0&lang=en>.

in the interstitial spaces of the city. According to Charles Esche in his description of the project, this activity was a declaration of Istanbul in Copenhagen.¹⁰⁹ As such, there is a kind of disjunctive union, one city fitting not so snugly into the other, suggesting a continuity between the two cities while also exposing the tenuous relationship between them.

Prior to an investigation of this project, and its permeation of multiple contexts, I would first like to provide some sense of the artistic practices of both the artist collective SUPERFLEX and Jens Haaning, and their working methodology for the 9th International Istanbul Biennial. As I stated previously, SUPERFLEX is an artist collective from Copenhagen, Denmark. The group consists of three members: Rasmus Nielsen, Jakob Fenger and Bjørnstjerne Christiansen, who met while attending the Denmark Royal Academy of Fine Art, and who have been working together since 1993.¹¹⁰ Their collective pursuits are rather difficult to characterize, as once again art historical categorizations fail to address the great diversity of practices and projects that their joint ventures entail. Working together, they are both artists and entrepreneurs; they are social activists and corporate managers—an uncomfortable mix for many on both sides of the fence. This is the result of the fact that SUPERFLEX is both a collective and a company.

In an interview with Åsa Nacking for the art journal *Afterall*, SUPERFLEX explains their decision to incorporate their activities: “Unlike artists who see themselves in opposition to society or who want to be alternative, we are working within the social structure. By using

¹⁰⁹Charles Esche, “SUPERFLEX & Jens Haaning,” 9th International Istanbul Biennial, <http://www.iksv.org/bienal/bienal9/english/?Page=Artists&Sub=Az&Content=SUPERFLEX>.

¹¹⁰Jay Babcock, “A Drink with a Twist,” *arthur*, <http://www.arthurmag.com/2008/06/07/superflex-interview-from-arthur-no-14/>.

this method we improve our chances of being socially and economically relevant.”¹¹¹ It is through this rather unconventional blending of art and alternative business models that they are able to converge a variety of practices, to walk multiple thin lines, and to engage even the most seemingly divergent points of view. This idea is critical to their practice, as each project undertaking is also the development of a communication system: “Discussion is an important part—the fact that we have an opportunity to enter into a dialogue with people from a variety of divergent positions. In this situation negative feedback can become an important part of the way the project develops. In that sense, the project may already be termed a success, since it is now part of the public debate.”¹¹² In this statement there are clear similarities between my interests in works of socially engaged, collaborative practices, but still I am hesitant to assert that success be measured by the initiation of public debate alone. After all, public debate is surely not the end goal of the projects contained within this larger analysis, but another beginning—an initiation of further processes of coming-into-being that extend beyond the more immediate project parameters.

Turning to the work of Jens Haaning now, there is a great deal of overlap between his practices/interests and those of SUPERFLEX. Both describe their practices as “tools” to be utilized within different societal machinations, tools that are adaptable by the various participants that are the crux of each undertaking, and that are operable on any of the multiple sides of a given issue. Most recently, Haaning’s work has addressed issues of immigration—particularly as it relates to the flow of non-Western people to the economic

¹¹¹ Åsa Nacking, “An Exchange between Åsa Nacking and SUPERFLEX,” SUPERFLEX, http://www.superflex.net/text/articles/an_exchange_between.shtml.

¹¹² Ibid.

centers of the West—and notions of “foreignness” in relation to hegemonic forces (culturally and politically speaking) and the power dynamics inherent to global processes of exchange and value determinations. Speaking with internationally renowned curator Hou Hanru, Haaning identifies three main interests that have largely shaped the trajectory of his artistic practice: namely, interests in existential questions, cultural, political and social issues, and the pleasure of creating and making things. As for his designation as an artist, he explains that “[t]he art field was the first area where I was able to combine and work with my three interests at the same time.”¹¹³ Here again we encounter the idea of the field of art as a field of converging ideas and practices, the expanding field that I referred to in the Introduction to this text and that Miwon Kwon cited as a key ingredient to contemporary collective art praxis.

Not surprisingly, much of Haaning’s work involves the notion of community, but this is not the liberal, positivistic notion of community that desires to create (blind) solidarities. Rather, “[b]y creating communities—at once inclusive and exclusive—, Haaning underscores what most art historians, theorists and critics have chosen to ignore: aesthetics is about people, not objects,” and thus he “presents community as a puzzle with no hope for a solution.”¹¹⁴ In dealing with immigrant communities in Europe, and Northern Europe more specifically, Haaning often sets up situations that do not lead to some kind of ameliorative resolution for the “communities” involved. More often than not, the sense of community is based on some similar ethnic or economic identification, or both in that it is common for

¹¹³Hou Hanru, “Interview with Jens Haaning,” in *Hello, My Name is Jens Haaning*, ed. Vincent Pécoil and Jens Haaning (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel/Xavier Douroux and Franck Gautherot, 2003), 162.

¹¹⁴Jennifer Allen, “The Art of Belonging,” in *Hello, My Name is Jens Haaning*, ed. Vincent Pécoil and Jens Haaning (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel/Xavier Douroux and Franck Gautherot, 2003), 106.

immigrant populations to stand on the lower rungs of the economic ladder as they struggle to gain a secure footing.

His work is decidedly ambiguous; Haaning will often integrate otherwise confrontational information and messages in a way that both speaks to and dissents from the dominant ideological positions of the various constituencies he demarcates for his projects. Nicolas Bourriaud writes about the representation of immigrant communities as foreign bodies: “Off-screen in relation to the social imagination, it is a ‘margin’ without images which we generally only perceive through politically coded representations,” and continues on to assert that much of Haaning’s work “has attempted to materialize these semi-invisible communities.”¹¹⁵ So how do these two practices—those of SUPERFLEX and Jens Haaning—combine in the *1000 biennial posters project*? What are the issues, the stakes and claims?

As with the work of Karl-Heinz Klopff, issues of great complexity are accessed through acts of relative simplicity. One could easily write off the posting of 1000 official Biennial posters as a rather banal act, as some kind of cross-promotional strategy that could easily melt away into the overabundance of signs and information that camouflage the true critical nature of this project. For these posters are exactly that: signs. But the information they contain does not only relate to the Biennial exhibition. These posters also signify Turkish identity, extending the reach of Turkish influence beyond its own immediate region and intruding upon the insularity of a Northern European nation (Denmark) that “is usually

¹¹⁵Nicolas Bourriaud, “Jens Haaning: Illegal Worker,” in *Hello, My Name is Jens Haaning*, ed. Vincent Pécoil and Jens Haaning (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel/Xavier Douroux and Franck Gautherot, 2003), 103-104.

concerned mainly with itself.”¹¹⁶ This is an open-ended act of recognition. And one that flirts with the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion that breach both local and global constructs. T.J. Demos, despite the “mostly pathetic” works of public art in the Biennial, found redemption in the work of SUPERFLEX and Jens Haaning, and provides a very apt description of the project’s aims:

to elevate the value of Turkey’s image in the eyes of its emigrants who have taken up residence in Denmark and to counter Danish xenophobia and racism by proclaiming Turkey’s admirable participation in the world of international art. Challenging those who conceive of national identity as rooted to a particular geography, this work, in an intriguing metonymic act, projected Istanbul beyond Turkey’s borders. By appropriating the biennial’s advertising campaign, the artists critically acknowledged the show as a commercial venture and diverted its promotion to catalyze a sense of belonging within an exile community through the public recognition of Turkish culture. The work incisively positioned globalization as an ongoing struggle between the forces of commercial exchange and cultural differentiation, making one all too aware of the simultaneous potential benefits and risks.¹¹⁷

Within this description we can identify many of the most critically significant ingredients that one would expect from a collaborative recipe for SUPERFLEX and Jens Haaning *stuvet oksekød* (a traditional Danish stew). The project has multiple talking points: the socioeconomic forces of globalization; issues relating to national and cultural identity; diaspora communities and the global exchange of commodities/bodies; to name a few significant markers. Without reducing the project to singular tropes, one can easily perceive how the different interests that inform both the work of SUPERFLEX and Jens Haaning become intertwined here, a blending of commentaries that are intended to invite the curious and skeptical eyes of passers-by.

¹¹⁶Charles Esche, “SUPERFLEX & Jens Haaning,” 9th International Istanbul Biennial, <http://www.iksv.org/bienal/bienal9/english/?Page=Artists&Sub=Az&Content=SUPERFLEX>.

¹¹⁷T.J. Demos, “9th International Istanbul Biennial,” *Artforum* 44, No. 3 (November 2005): 246.

In the *1000 biennial poster project*, marketing strategies and the commercialism that has now (negatively) come to be associated with the biennial model worldwide is coupled with the probing of racist tendencies that result in the crossing of borders. Hand in hand, then, the racial coloring of socioeconomic forces is revealed, but the effects are not so ideologically driven. The work is very much open to interpretation, as Demos suggests, an ambiguous message that could provide both a sense of belonging for the displaced communities and/or a visual analogy of their own alienation from the society in which they now live. Haaning's work often sets up these kinds of ambiguous situations. In the mid-90's he created two public works that involved the telling of jokes in foreign languages that created a similar type of situation whereby access to a marginalized identity (through language) could have been read as an act of solidarity with such marginal communities, or interpreted as further exploiting the lack of understanding and tolerance between the dominant social groups and displaced, subjugated individuals. During the interview with Hou Hanru, Haaning offers a very intriguing insight as to his own approach and intentions to these highly contentious issues, and it is one that I think is also at play in the *1000 biennial posters project*.

I would like to compare the public works, where I have used Turkish or Arabic languages, with the abstract drawings Sigmund Freud was using in his therapy. The abstract communication with the viewer who does not understand the used language, speaks to the material which is already stored in the receiver. Some reactions have been that racist people were sure that it was a racist work—"he is making fun of the foreigners". And some anti-racist people have been sure that the intention was anti-racist—"can you please come to our university and put up your work as a campaign against the Nazi skinheads". Of course I am aware of the danger of misunderstanding these works, but due to the intentions behind the works, I will take the same position as Freud: "It is ok that you see a hairy monster eating a little girl since this is not a conclusion or an end point, but a part of the process where we

progress as human beings by looking at what we contain.”¹¹⁸

After all, is this not the true experiential nature of art? Perception and experience are always emanating from very specific individual subject positions, the filters by which each and every one of us come to make sense of our lives. What the work of art represents are the various subject positions that are embedded within a certain society, a certain social space, public space and participants (willing or not). In this way I believe it is quite accurate to speak of the work as a tool, as functioning within a carefully selected social situation and space in order to draw out and upon the myriad of subject positions that are at the sociopolitical *and* aesthetic core of contemporary life.

Writing almost 10 years ago, critic Barbara Steiner characterized SUPERFLEX's work in a similar way, relying on the concept of “radical democracy” as outlined by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. As cited by Steiner in her essay for *NU: The Nordic Art Review*,

“Radical democracy” demands “the creation of new subject-positions that would allow the common articulation, for example, of anti-racism, anti-sexism, and anti-capitalism. These struggles do not simultaneously converge. In order to establish democratic equivalences, a new ‘common sense’ is necessary... For it is not a matter of establishing a mere alliance between given interests, but of actually modifying the very identity of these forces.”¹¹⁹

In this light, the work of SUPERFLEX and Jens Haaning can be seen as part of a larger project, of radical democracy, or at least as a facet of this theoretical position. The *1000 biennial poster project* creates a situation within a very specific context—or perhaps between

¹¹⁸Hou Hanru, “Interview with Jens Haaning,” in *Hello, My Name is Jens Haaning*, ed. Vincent Pécoil and Jens Haaning (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel/Xavier Douroux and Franck Gautherot, 2003), 164-165.

¹¹⁹Barbara Steiner, “Radical Democracy, Acknowledging the Complexities and Contingencies,” SUPERFLEX, <http://www.superflex.net/text/articles/acknowledging.shtml>.

contexts: between Istanbul and Not-Istanbul, Copenhagen and Not-Copenhagen, Istanbul and Copenhagen, Not-Istanbul and Not-Copenhagen, etc.—where different subject positions become entangled, and through this entanglement the possibility for confrontation, a kind of working through these positions so as to unravel the knot, is provoked. This does not smooth out all the wrinkles, but it does (idealistically) oblige the various sides to recognize one another, and through this very act of recognition change is enacted: they come to see each other through actual interaction, rather than through abstract notions or mediated representations of otherness. This leads Steiner to say of SUPERFLEX (and Haaning, I would contend) that their work “investigates communicative processes in which power, hegemony, assertion and oppression, and the gain and loss of terrain become evident. Various parties—individuals or groups—enter the scene with specific interests and fight to assert them. The point is not merely to define a cultural expression, but to secure and specify its relation to reality (in the sense of representation) in order to legitimize one’s own concerns.”¹²⁰ But still the questions remain: how effective was this project in truly catalyzing these processes of display and recognition? How does one begin to measure or evaluate the successfulness of such a work?

¹²⁰Barbara Steiner, “Radical Democracy, Acknowledging the Complexities and Contingencies,” SUPERFLEX, <http://www.superflex.net/text/articles/acknowledging.shtml>.

Conclusion

Throughout the course of this essay there have been a number of questions that have more or less gone unanswered. In both case studies and each project analysis, the question as to the exact value, the true social relevance and ongoing significance of the work under scrutiny has eluded any definite articulation. I must admit that this is something that I have struggled with; yet, upon further consideration, what has been revealed to me is actually my own (perhaps misplaced) desire for some quantifiable or lasting qualitative dimension of the works to be able to point to and say: “This is why these works are important; here is the observable evidence of actual social change and transformation.” It is clear to me now that it would actually be quite disturbing to be able to do so, and such a concretization of these largely ephemeral processes and interactions contradicts both the aesthetic and sociopolitical valuations that I have outlined as criteria for the evaluation of these projects. As I stated previously, it is important to understand these projects as instances within a much larger framework, an ongoing project that relates something of Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of “radical democracy.” In this respect I wholeheartedly agree with a statement made by internationally renowned curator of contemporary art Fulya Erdemci, who—in an interview with Ingrid Commandeur—said: “For me, the *raison d’être* of any art project in public space is to create a contrast, unfold a conflict and even add more conflict to make it visible.”¹²¹

Each of the socially engaged, collaborative public art projects considered in this text metabolizes the information provided by the different participants in order to create new

¹²¹Ingrid Commandeur, “Interview with Fulya Erdemci,” Metropolis M, <http://www.metropolism.org/features/fulya-erdemci-new-director-of-sk/>.

forms of knowledge that, in turn, become subject positions to be exposed and further metabolized through the course of other activities. It is an unending process, a kind of evolutionary life cycle towards ever more refined and sophisticated forms of knowledge. As such, the notions of adaptability and improvisation become fundamental to the success or failure of the project, determining its relative futurity or positioning it within contemporary discourse as a “great leap forward.” Of course, such hyperbolic polarizations are intended only to circumscribe the possibilities inherent to such projects, as the majority of them oscillate between such extremes, rather than existing as fixed points along a continuum. Perhaps a more important thing to consider is the after life of these projects: the way in which they enter social consciousness, both within the world of art and the world at large. Beyond their immediate ramifications, these projects enter into the encyclopedia of ideas and practices and continue to operate as critical foci around and through which future practices engage and/or take their lead. In short, such practices contribute to the ever-expanding field of artistic production and social consciousness; they themselves become tools to be used by various cultural agents in their further tinkering.

The two case studies within this analysis convey a sense of the multiple layers and different sets of practices that fall under the rubric of socially engaged, collaborative public art. Despite the grouping together of these projects under such a heading, important differences emerge that do more to reveal the complexity and contingent nature of these projects than to unify them as a singular *modus operandi*. Specifically speaking to the central concepts I have outlined throughout the course of these analyses, it becomes even more evident that the notions of collaboration, representation, and community require not only careful attention but contextualization as well. In constructing situations by way of

works of art, the artists and curators under discussion here have enacted vastly different processes that derive a great deal of their meaning from the conditions of their implementation, display, and reception.

As I have stated elsewhere, collaboration is not merely individuals working together in some harmonious interaction; in fact, the interaction between the various constituencies may be indirect, and may not even occupy the same spatiotemporal frame. The processes of identification that result from the engagement of sociopolitical issues, which are at the core of each project, shape the different constituencies or loose communities of people, but these are never definite or complete formations. Representation is always coming-into-being and simultaneously slipping away, emerging and receding, oscillating between visibility and invisibility. Furthermore, from an aesthetic standpoint, perhaps one way to think of the successfulness of such projects is the formulating of the project's mode of address, of its communicability. What attracts me most to *ciudadMULTIPLEcity* and the 9th International Istanbul Biennial, and specifically to the work of Brooke Alfaro, Jesús Palomino, Karl-Heinz Klopff, SUPERFLEX and Jens Haaning, is the uncanny ability of the curators and artists to develop systems of communication, of dialogue and debate between various groups of people that perhaps may not otherwise readily engage one another despite the fact that they occupy the same spaces. More often than not, it seems to me, these groups are unrecognized compatriots in the daily social lives and urban fabric of the cities in which they live. The very power of these projects, then, rests in their ability to bring into focus such processes of recognition.

At a very personal level, I know that change and consciousness come about as a result of some challenge to my own sense of comfort or security (ideological or otherwise). A

feeling of growth and accomplishment is often the result of such moving beyond one's self, of the breaking down of boundaries. Just as the artistic projects within this essay become vulnerable to the input of multiple voices and perspectives (something I also contribute to here, through the process of writing), so too do the participants become vulnerable, exposing themselves through the assertion of their own subject positions. Such processes develop both self-knowledge as well as knowledge of the "other." As this functions at the individual level, it seems safe to say that the same could be applied to collective bodies and even to society itself. It is well recognized that crises precipitate change, and these works of art create situations wherein moments of crisis linger and provoke.

But what constitutes a crisis does not necessarily have to entail some global disaster, or major travesty. A crisis is a very subjectively determined causal root, the experience of which is not foreign to our daily lives. In fact, it is something most of us negotiate on a daily basis. Thus, it is exactly the way in which the aforementioned artists create situations forms of potential crises that I am most interested in, and that I believe can truly activate individuals and collective bodies to move beyond the comfort of their own identifications, to be able to step outside and look within. This process inflects both the knowledge of the self and the other, and being able to see in this new light already constitutes a significant change. The potential for growth is also the potential to grow together, as well as to grow apart, and the directionality of such processes are largely influenced by the quality and character of the interactive experience created by artists and curators in collaboration with specific constituencies or publics.

Through the course of writing I have come to value these projects by the possibilities that they create, rather than by some final authored product. Specifically, the possibility that

is inherent to each of these projects is largely determined by the weaving together of aesthetic considerations and a multivalent form of sociopolitical address. There is most certainly an art to the creation of possibilities, and it is the ongoing elaboration of such possibilities that ensure both the critical nature of art as a socially engaged, collaborative practice and its social relevancy. In his interview with Jelena Vesic, Charles Esche confesses that “[p]ossibility is a key word for me. By possibility I simply mean the space to think the world otherwise than it is,” and that “[i]t’s also important to understand possibility not as a fixed condition but a slippery and changeable state made up of spatial, temporal and relational elements.”¹²² Possibility, as understood here, is also a mutable concept, a concept to be grappled with, not a delectable morsel to be easily consumed. Finally, the very possibility of making the invisible visible, of excavating the social tensions and power dynamics of local and global society—*in situ*—will only ever further expand our knowledge of ourselves, of how we live and why things exist as they do. Equipped with such knowledge, we can begin to consider other alternatives, other ways of existing that throws off the shell of complacency and seeks a more informed way of life.

¹²²Jelena Vesic, “About Exhibitions, Modest Proposals and Possibilities: Interview with Charles Esche,” Prelom Kolektiv, http://www.prelomkolektiv.org/pdf/esche_e.pdf.



Plate 1.1 Brooke Alfaro. *Nine* (detail), 2002-3.



Plate 1.2 Brooke Alfaro. *Nine* (detail), 2002-3.



Plate 2.1 Jesús Palomino. *Vendors and Squatters* (detail), 2003.



Plate 2.2 Jesús Palomino. *Vendors and Squatters* (detail), 2003.

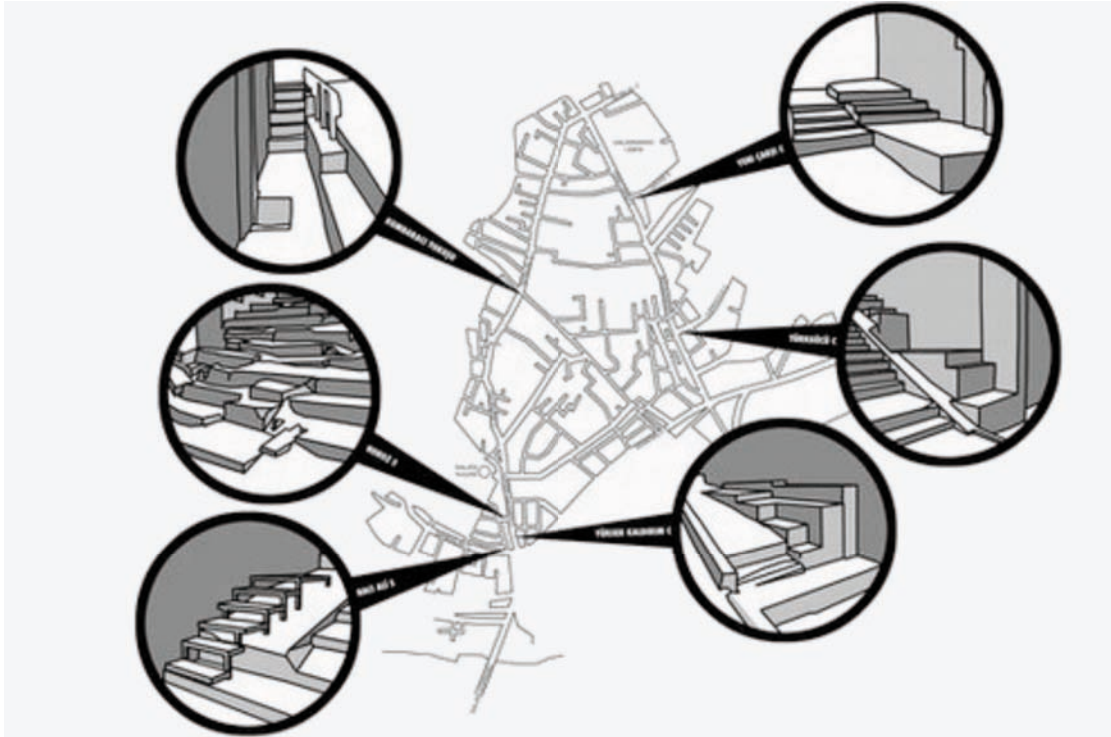


Plate 3.1 Karl-Heinz Klopff. *Mind the Steps* (detail), 2005.

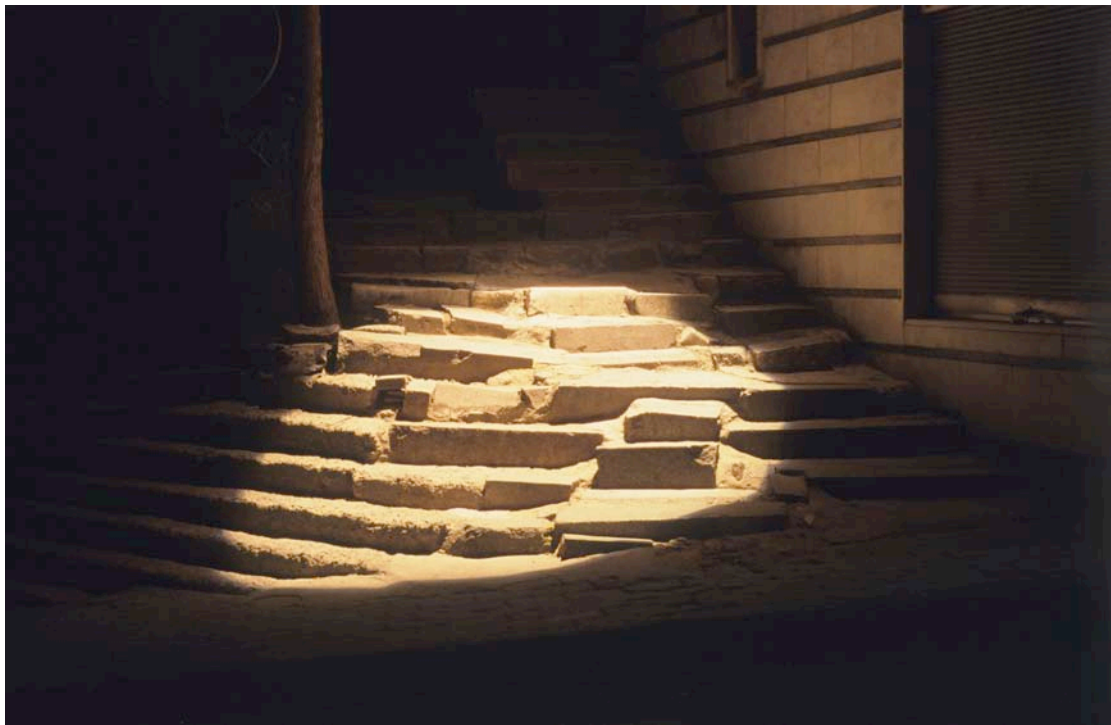


Plate 3.2 Karl-Heinz Klopff. *Mind the Steps* (detail), 2005.



Plate 4.1 SUPERFLEX & Jens Haaning. *1000 Istanbul Biennial Posters* (detail), 2005.



Plate 4.2 SUPERFLEX & Jens Haaning. *1000 Istanbul Biennial Posters* (detail), 2005.

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