

Something More Than Just Survival

The people and tents of Occupy LA are all around me. In a little thirity, and having worked in the sun all afternoon, I can smell my body. I can smell my neighborhood's too. Informed and comforted by our smells I sniff like a dog; though more discretely I hope.

Gathered around the base of Los Angeles City Hall, Occupy LA represents a range of opinions but, reformer and revolutionary alike, we are united by the demand that our social, political and economic structures stop servicing and re-calibrate to assuage human need.

With politics-as-usual leaving no choice but submission to a system that prioritises the pursuit of profit over absolutely everything else, our gathering together embodies that demand.

Did we all wake up one day and realise that all we really have is a body and each other? And what do humans need anyway?

(I)

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(II)

I lost my full-time job on December 16th, 2010 and as of November 18, 2011, I have been unemployed for almost one year. My household income dropped substantially and quickly. During this difficult time, in order to continue to work as a socially engaged creative person, I decided that I needed to redirect and expand my notion of where and how cultural production happens, and by this I mean that I have a "post-studio practice".

With this in mind, I created the creative concept for the Social Practices Art Network (SPAN), out of a need to increase the capacity and range of my own social network. With less income and resources, I quickly had to figure out how to remain connected to an international creative community in order to remain visible and active in my field as an artist. Therefore, the action of doing this became my actual artistic "work".

(www.feastinbrooklyn.org)

FEAST in Brooklyn (Funding Emerging Art with Sustainable Tactics) is a recurring public dinner designed to use community-driven financial support to democratically fund new and emerging art makers. At each FEAST, patrons give a \$20 donation for which they receive supper and a ballot. Diners spend the evening reviewing a series of project proposals and conversing with the artists behind each idea. Attendees cast a vote for their favourite proposal, and by the end of the night, the artist who garners the most votes is awarded a grant comprised of that evening's door money. Since 2009, FEAST Brooklyn has produced 10 dinners, funded dozens of projects and raised over \$15,000. Meanwhile, similar models have emerged all over the country, resulting in a network of organisations committed to rethinking how art is financed and communally experienced. FEAST in Brooklyn emerged from a collective of friends discussing sustainability in the arts. We concluded that the arts should not rely solely on the support of exclusive, private capital. We wanted a more localised model for art funding. We wondered how art could serve the immediate needs of a neighbourhood and in turn find financial support within that community. We found inspiration in our CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) farm shares, and in many respects FEAST functions as a CSA for artists.



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Janet Owen Driggs & Jules Rochielle

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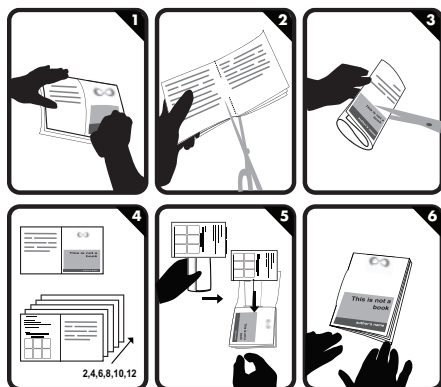
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Optimism is warranted too, in light of the contemporary cultural context. Which is not to suggest that the occupations are a product of art practice. But rather to say that the impulses fuelling them are kin to those driving an older shift of resources – both human and, increasingly, institutional – away from the production of objects to the production of relations. Or, to put it another way, away from the “assertion of an independent and private symbolic space” to “the realm of human interactions” where meanings are construed collectively [4].

Social Sculpture, New Genre Public Art, Social Aesthetics, Relational Aesthetics, Participatory Practice, Social Practice – the names are numerous but the nuances that distinguish one form from another fade in comparison to the awareness of, engagement with, and value for interdependence which unites them all.

The occupations that are currently happening in more than two thousand communities worldwide, embody, above all, the desire for change[1]. Not I think, or not only, change for its own sake in that avant-garde fashion that decreed: “the mother must die so that the child may live”[2]. But rather change that stretches for the non-hierarchical, non-authoritarian plane of “horizontalidad”, or perhaps for the kind of third space described by Gloria Anzaldúa:

“At some point...we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combatants somehow healed so that we are on both shores at once and, at once, see through serpent and eagle eyes”[3].

Is this an optimistic interpretation of a young movement that will almost inevitably succumb to recuperation, ridicule, violence, or any other of the strategies that sustain the dynamics of hierarchy? Possibly. But at the very least the slogan “we are the 99%”, suggests that something other than divisive old politics-as-usual is in play in the US.

(www.fluxfactory.org)

Flux Factory began in 1994, in an old spice factory in Williamsburg, New York City. It was founded as an informal artist collective to create an alternative platform to the commercial gallery scene. About four years later, with a new stage built and twice as many members, the Flux Factory living room evolved into a site for art events and performances of all kinds. Flux became an official 501 (c)(3) non-profit in 1999 and moved to 43rd Street in Long Island City, Queens in 2002.

(www.bronxriverart.org)

Bronx River Art Center (BRAC) is a culturally diverse, multi-arts, non-profit organization that provides a forum for community, artists, and youth to transform creativity into vision. Our Education, Exhibitions, Artist Studios, and Presenting Programs cultivate leadership in an urban environment and stewardship of our natural resource – the Bronx River. Bronx River Art Center (BRAC) was founded in 1987 to bring professional arts programming to a culturally under-served population. For more than twenty years (including several years of arts programming under the umbrella of the first Bronx River Restoration project), this multi-arts centre has filled the West Farms community of the Bronx with art and environmental experiences. Our programs are designed to encourage our residents to engage in creative activism towards the revitalisation and future of their neighbourhood.

Broodwork is the cross-disciplinary art and design project founded by Iris Anna Regn and Rebecca Niederlander that names the previously unspoken community of practitioners whose work realised an unexpected perspectival shift after becoming parents.

(www.broodwork.com)

Panoply Performance Lab (PPL) is a performance collective formed in 2006 by librettist/director/video artist Esther Neff and composer/musician/sound artist Brian McCorkle. PPL's hyper-structural performance art projects are developed in collaboration with individuals from many different walks of life, through community workshops, interviews, and other engaged practices. They often examine complex systems and trace epistemic, emotional, and socio-political viewpoints held by individuals and groups.

(www.panplylab.org)

Gängeviertel Hamburg is a conglomerate of galleries and other projects located in former derelict buildings in central Hamburg. Issues explored by the Gängeviertel collective include: urban change, gentrification, and the commodification of art and space. The project has been considered a breakthrough in the struggle for more urban art space in Hamburg by both the media, and the communities its work touches. Its future, and the precedent it sets, is widely discussed across the art scene and the wider public context.

(www.das-gaengeviertel.info)

And there is, I think, another driver worth mentioning here: the human need for physical communion. By which I mean the need to be an analogue body sharing real space with other real bodies – an experience that is being eroded by the increasing ubiquity of digital communications technologies. Though the impacts of such technologies are still largely speculative, scientists assert that “a paucity of brain-nourishing touch causes neurological atrophy and increased violence”, which rather suggests a poor outcome [8]. While for theorist Paul Virillio, in addition to degrading memory and the collective imagination, digital technologies effect “de-corporation”, which leaves the body “torn and disintegrated”.

Money masks the reality of our mutual dependence one upon another. But when – as happened prior to the emergence of horizontalidad in Argentina – economies are in collapse, the mask thins. “Reduced resources... give rise to increased sensitivity to the social context, greater interpersonal engagement, and enhanced empathic accuracy” psychologists assert [5]. In the context of poverty, in other words, empathy, collectivity, and pro-social behaviours become tools for mutual survival.

With food price volatility worldwide doubling during the period 2006-2010[6], 17% of North Americans now enrolled in government anti-poverty programs, and the European Union on the brink of implosion, it can be no coincidence that poverty management strategies are becoming central to the “new” relational cultural matrix [7]. Time banks, barter systems, sharing, making and growing, teaching circles; these were common non-art practices in my British grandparent's era of poverty and war, and they have never stopped being common in working class and low-income communities. As effective tools for human survival, how much more important are they now, in the context of potential environmental collapse?

The primary objective of (SPAN) is to connect people and ideas; connecting things that may be disconnected and visualising things that could be connected, exploring the possible outcomes once these bonds are made.

Initially, (SPAN) was created out of an artist's personal need to generate possibilities for economic survival and a belief in the potential that is generated through building a collaborative and connected creative community. Perhaps, even out of the belief that our ability to find new ways of working and supporting one another is equivalent to our survival on the planet. As artists and citizens of this planet, it is essential to our survival that we continue to find a way of feeding and empowering one another.

As an artist, (SPAN) became a practice of navigating my own economic reality, moving out of a frame of isolation into a place of connection, propelled by the intrinsic knowledge that the body needs nourishment to thrive and that the network created through the community building of (SPAN) is an umbilical cord that can offer this much needed nourishment. Building this cord that threads us together can lead us to discover new ways of working together in an expanded framework of practice.

Appendix

The following "Listening Stations" have been established in the following Hub Locations. (SPAN) and each of the groups below have agreed to conduct "Listening Sessions" with (SPAN) to create an archive or record of their practice. The (SPAN) archive continues to grow through this process because each "Listening Station" because a hub for a range of artistic practices or artistic engagements.

El Puente Lab is a platform for artistic and cultural production, active in Medellín, Colombia, which aims to develop cultural projects on a local level, building bridges of communication with artists and experts through a strategy of international co-operation. The projects developed by El Puente Lab meet the specific needs of the social context where they are carried out, using artistic creativity as a tool of activation of cultural projects that initiate, facilitate and / or accompany processes of education, communication and urban and social transformation.

(www.elpuentelab.org)

Elsewhere is a living museum set inside a former thrift store. The three story building, housing one woman's 58 year collection of thrift and surplus, has become a living installation curated by hundreds of contributors over a 9 year period. Today, Elsewhere is a space to investigate creative collaboration, through the living museum, community events, international residency program, and educational initiatives.

(www.elsewhereelsewhere.org)

Planning and felicity have provided Jules Rochelle's growing archive of social practices with a singularly appropriate acronym. Arising from and participating in contemporary conditions, the Social Practices Art Network (SPAN) is a tool by which the artist/archivist and her collaborators operate as both bridge builders and surveyors in a plane of proliferating social practices.

The audio interviews, articles and links that comprise (SPAN)'s website, and the real space "listening stations" by which Rochelle probes social and community practices in specific locales, foster both present and future relationship networks. At the same time, (SPAN)'s record of actions undertaken and memories spoken generates a dynamic diagram of distributed activities that may well, in a society where human need is not yet privileged, otherwise remain local, intimate, invisible.

Regardless of a specific social practice project's political intent or the capacity of the occupations to withstand repression and recuperation, both phenomena are engaging alternatives to normative modes of discourse. By organising and relating in ways that privilege interdependence and human need, they break away from the hierarchical, individualistic world of "mortal combatants" that Anzaldúa describes. If not actually "prefiguring the social relationships by which the future will be shaped", then at the very least they are composing and performing, in the present, the manners and mores that may enable us something more than survival in the resource scarce future [9].

For Gloria Anzaldúa:

"Bridges are... primal symbols of shifting consciousness... conduits, and connectors that connote transitioning, crossing borders, and changing perspectives." [10]

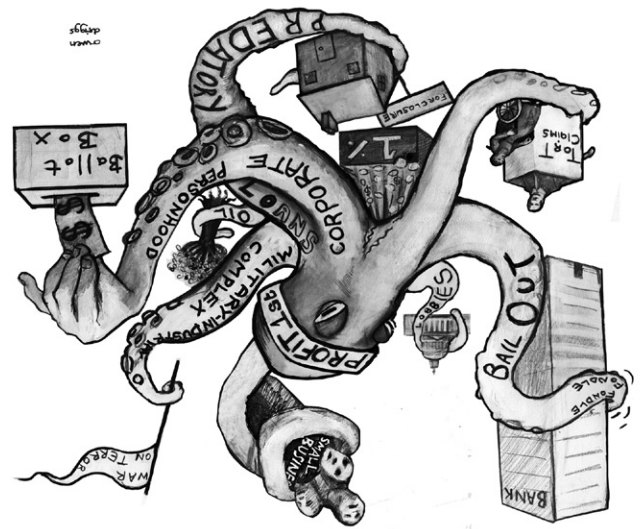
Through (SPAN) I decided to map my own process of navigating this terrain and to create a network as an experiment in community building. (SPAN) is about creating a social space through which to engage people in conversation and exchange, building connections while ending the silence that exists between us; (SPAN) is the exploration of possibilities created through both formal and informal networks.

The work of (SPAN) primarily happens in two locations: my home in Los Angeles and in Brooklyn, NY. The initial layer of outreach is often done online through various forms of social media and via recorded Skype calls that create links to local, national and international communities of artists. One of the set intentions of (SPAN) is to create a resource for individuals, organisations, community groups and institutions that are interested in new genre arts forms and practices. It is meant to serve as an online platform for a variety of socially engaged creative practices.

The process put forward by (SPAN) is a Social Practice; incorporating diverse media art strategies and interventions, it is a form of social sculpture that makes use of interactive media and art/life performance. By using a model of "co-creation" between myself and others, it becomes a critical intervention into an existing social system that can catalyse a larger social exchange. The primary practice or enactment of (SPAN) happens through the activation of "Listening Stations" and "Listening Sessions".

A Listening Station is a digital community archive. These represent various collaborations or conversations held with individual artists or groups. Listening Stations are located online and sometimes are exhibited as an archive of interviews and conversations.

Listening Sessions are a method of collecting information about various socially engaged artists, art collectives and other types of socially engaged thinkers – these tune into the voice of an international network comprised of these people.



"This network", writes Rochielle, "is a performance of connecting things that may not be connected and visualising things that can be connected". An example of the digital in support of the physical, SPAN facilitates relationship networks that operate in and through two kinds of space, the virtual and the real. I learn about your action and venture out to join you. We plan a project that happens on the ground. We come together, close enough to smell the bodies.

Janet Owen Driggs