

"NOTES FOR A PUBLIC ARTIST" \*

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Many cultural institutions will lose their credibility if they don't develop community-based initiatives. Art may have appeared very exclusive but it is now a way for organizations to appear to have an interest--a stake in representing community concerns. As government funding becomes scarce they have to look for support in other areas. So, suddenly these groups realized they need to develop community constituencies.

Cultural fund-raiser, Pitt.

I want to know why all of a sudden there is all this interest in the community. Why now, at this particular time, when you were not interest in us before. What are your motives? What are your hidden agendas? Why is there this trend?

Resident, pitt.

11 slides- mall to space

As others have pointed out, it seems that the whole notion of site-specificity has been overburdened with the changing characteristics of nomadic capital.

Since there is no "there" there in a city that we as subjects can map or own, various forms of power have initiated urban reform and renewal to "re-humanize" the city. The failure of such renewal efforts to do much more than further separate the wealthy from the rest of the population is well documented. So too is the intimate involvement of supposedly progressive architects and urban designers in this process. Efforts of public art agencies have inherited this narrative of urban reform and helped to shape it.

### 3 -food table

Urban renewal is by definition relentlessly utopian. Governmental officials and executive officers possibly imagine the needs of the citizen but repeatedly intensify their towering image of a city fortified against the majority of its residents. Their master plan needs to be both a singular representative of the permanence of corporate presence and subject to the wandering manifestations of consumption and the overwhelming sensuality of huge urban infrastructures. Planners instinctively understand our need to feel the anxiety of scale when we shop.

The proposed perfection of many downtowns continues unabated while the satellite neighborhoods deteriorate into a global phenomenon now known in the U.S. as "third worldism." As our cities are increasingly divided according to the dependable categories of wealth and race, the gigantic paradises of Nike Town, Warner Bros. Store and Disney fill urban centers with "pleasure." These spaces are taken up as theme parks - representing a displaced notion of how we actually might live together. The meeting ground for all citizens is where they can meet as shoppers. Meanwhile, the gap between the rich and the poor has been growing so steadily in America since the end of the sixties that nearly a quarter of our population now live below traditional understandings of a poverty line. The public fantasy of a downtown scripted by the libidinal drives of consumption is more and more the solution to the urban crisis.

#### 8. marlboros

But the rhetoric of urban renewal as spoken sincerely by those that work within its logic remains often inclusive and liberal. We consistently hear from city planners how everyone should have a voice, be empowered to move freely through both space and class, and be able to exercise fluid notions of democracy. It is not a mistake that renewal agencies recognize the management of space as a force in reorganizing social position and

place. Artists and the agencies organized around them try to reinforce this refrain but often remain separated from actual power and therefore from ideas of consequence and responsibility.

12 first dazibao

In 1983 the artists collective Group Material produced a self-initiated public art project called "Dazibaos". This is a Chinese word meaning large character posters, from a movement near the end of the cultural revolution in which signs were allowed to be posted on a certain wall in Beijing. In their original context these statements took on the form of a public dialogue that eventually led to actual reformation of policy decisions by the state. What we did in New York in 1983 was to interview people informally on the street or formally in offices and workplaces to establish a series of texts that would describe the relationships between a person and the topic or subject we were addressing. The finished product was a series of quotations wheat pasted on the side of an abandoned department store that compared opinions on pressing governmental policy decisions: from prison reform to military intervention in Central America. Group Material's "Democracy Wall" work has been done in many ways in different contexts over the years. But the principle has remained pretty consistent for Group Material and I think it's applicable to the nascent

disaster of tyrannical community  
descriptions - we now inherit in much of  
the discourse around public art..

## dazibao 3

Resisting the idea of a survey or a  
poll, the piece was more like a manifesto  
authored by us in which a model of how to  
re configure social space can be  
presented within the public sphere.  
Although the concerns of self-identified  
communities were represented through the  
statements of individuals, the actual  
meaning of "Dazibaos" was more than the  
set of texts on the walls. We were  
making a model of a social conversation  
in a public place rather than  
representing any of the particular voices  
that were actually in the work. Such a  
project wasn't about "empowering" or  
"enabling" any of the participants but  
instead was an effort to picture of the  
process of democracy itself - as  
something essentially empty until filled  
with the struggle of competing voices and  
agendas of individuals and alliances. We  
seemed to be saying that such a picture  
depended somewhat on rethinking space as  
neither neutral or inconsequential.

## dazibao 4

Our interviews in streets, homes and  
offices had no preordained plan or

limitations. "Dazibaos" could have had points of political identification or political will represented. In particular, it had the characteristic of monumentalizing a random or wandering subject. Our viewer could assign her or himself to a plurality of represented identifications and political positions.

dazibao 5,6.

One of the remarkably consistent features I remember from the early days of putting together art shows and other forms of cultural activism was the frightening misuse of pronouns by folks occupied with organizing others. It seems predictable now to notice how often the word "we" really stands for "me" - or an even more confusing use of the word "everybody" instead of "me." As a teacher once said, there is a "presumptive and unspoken ease of access" in speaking as if we represent a group. This linguistic arrogance represents more than an unrecognized slip of purpose - it is the "indignity of speaking for others" that Foucault so wisely warned us against. When such presumptions are spoken by artists it is even more profoundly a misrecognition of the kernel of a growing disastrous alignment between artistic critique and urban renewal. We sound like city planners when we ask our designs and diagrams to speak in proposal form for what we imagine are the hopes of others.

## 4 public places

The real failures for artists engaged with these issues seem to come about when we feel complacent about the methods with which an audience is presented to us. Who is characterizing this community for us? What agency is behind the picture? Sometimes just the description of a group itself as a receptive entity can cause a tremendous breakdown in the possibility of criticality. It seems this is already a danger that many artists are intimately aware of: the essential notion of the viewer of our work as being limited by his/her geographical location or his/her physiological characteristics or historical experience. Even though one must encourage the notion of common experience to give credit to collective resistance, the danger of predescribing audiences and indignantly speaking for others is shadowing our practices. I believe these disheartening occurrences are manifestly embraced and latently encouraged by many official organizing efforts in the public art industry.

In the spring of 1994 Group Material was invited to participate in the Three Rivers Arts Festival of Pittsburgh Pennsylvania, an annual conglomeration of musical and theatrical performances, craft sales, and art exhibitions. As a

fulfillment of the public art component of this four week event, the planners decided to embark on a "community based public art" initiative. We were encouraged to "find a community for our work" and to research neighborhoods to establish the social needs of a particular urban area or constituency.

logo and 1st page

Our proposal was to use the printed guide of the Three Rivers Arts Festival that was to be inserted in the local newspaper as a site for direct interrogation of these conceptions of public art and its audience that I have described earlier. In reading through its schedules, essays, and acknowledgments, it seemed clear that this was the place that the "effect" of the festival's work is meant to be communicated to others - whether audience or sponsors. Implicit in a guide shaped by such a complex set of forces are the phantom positions of the festival's many diverse constituencies - from government agencies to corporations to art museum boards to private donors and groups of volunteers. In the pages of the guide are written the explicit ways we are to understand and demarcate the space of the festival in relation to agencies that manage, produce, condition or even own that space. The guide, then, is a kind of contract for participation. But implicit in such a contract we know there is



another meaning: the implications of opening the public spaces of a city to the desires of its inhabitants.

25. airport

Our work attempted to obscure its own status as art in order to further the mobility of its intervention. We printed a series of quotations that were created from interviews that we conducted on the streets and in the homes, cars and offices of people from Pittsburgh. This was a technique very similar to the one used in our Dazibaos project. We took out ads in local newspapers asking for memories and secrets - we went on talk radio. We also interjected quotes from architects, critics and designers to bring the conversation into a dialogic form. We were proposing that a conversation about different uses of the city can become a public artwork. We wanted to consider the term "community" in relation to the Festival itself.

26. Pittsburgh is like a big fort. Geographically it's bound by a highway which goes all around the city. So before you get to Pittsburgh you can't see it. Usually you can see a city five or ten minutes before you arrive--but not here. It's very separating.

A year before the work by Group Material was to be produced, we went to Pittsburgh to witness the Festival as an ongoing event. It became immediately clear that such an event has a schizophrenic relationship to the growth

of the city beyond the expected and described paradoxes of urban renewal. Specifically many official celebrations of cities walk a difficult terrain between privatized corporate sponsorship and governmental representations of social progress. On the one hand, the festival was to serve the citizens of Pittsburgh as a vehicle for public expression of identity and culture, an agenda sincerely felt by many of its organizers. On the other hand, it needed to ameliorate and confuse the complex social relations that make the ongoing project of urban renewal possible and by extension the agenda of public art production.

whole page w/ places and fragment

It became obvious to us early on that the only way to try to produce something critically generative in such a context was to try to make the whole public art process very conscious of itself. We tried to represent the struggle for identification and power that happens within the normal business of the city's infrastructure as expressed in the ongoing problems experienced by a progressive arts agency within and without the complex array of forces that make a city. In a sense, the guide to the festival would be full of suggestions, many even used by silent neighbors and secret friends, to how each

of us can use the city differently than it was meant to be used. By quoting the memories, struggles, interpretations, and crimes connected with urban spaces we were trying to rewrite the syntax of a walk through the city.

Many officials are using the vocabulary of the community. This kind of thing reminds me of Pat Buchanan quoting Martin Luther King. He said, he "wants color blindness and this is what Dr. King wanted," so much of the language common in the sixties in the civil rights movement is now used by conservatives. It's being absorbed. Today you can justify dislocating people by using a language of inclusivity.

We wanted to model tactical uses of the city that would counter both hegemonic design and limited uses of the term "community". The anonymous quotes in the brochure became a compendium of testimonials introducing a picture of a community that understands itself through experiences not identities; through expression not trauma. By interweaving this dialogue within the actual publicity material of the Festival, we hoped to inform understandings of public space active discussions of the struggle for self-representation.

We used to say "meet at the pit, or the gully next to the main sewer pipes," or a place in the woods. It was dirty but we didn't care, we were young, we were boys. We would make up code names for the places we'd go--like one place in the woods we called Hawaii. And we'd say "let's all meet there tonight and do a party." Later we'd disburse [sic] and go out into the public or whatnot, but we had our private little spaces. The cops knew that's where we went, but because there were woods, they really couldn't do anything. Cars couldn't go there so they'd have to patrol it on foot and we'd see their flashlights. Usually only your friends and people you knew would be there.

Primary in the public language of art agencies are descriptions of democratic developments in culture. Strongly informed by the institutionalization of community organizing, public art's misanthropic separatism from the real concerns of the "everyday" reorients it from a supposedly elitist notions of audience to more democratic definitions of community. It may be understandable for institutionally identified practices and people to embrace remedial notions of disenfranchisement - many art agencies need to take on the language of civic bureaucracies and philanthropic agencies if they want to survive. But I think it always seems disappointing when artists, who have available to them descriptions of intellectually independent and critical practices, succumb to limiting descriptions of the relationship between our work and the dream we call our audience.

Once I made drawings of the paths people took through downtown on their lunch hours. I would sketch these little maps to see if there was any important shape or hidden meaning in the routes people took.

I think the city from up high, the city as solely a visual experience, is obviously one that we can see as being manipulated by agency, gesture, or even whim. Those who own the city have had this feeling from the beginning I would assume - especially

in fast growth cities like in the U.S. But the city on the street is the physical entity many of us know, it is lived and created through living: through the way space can be redesigned and reused and even stolen to serve the needs of new definitions of the self. Cities can be remade by wandering around and acting out our own maps. By interviewing both the consumers and the producers of public places Group Material wanted to demonstrate that one is allowed to be who one is because of the way that space is performed around you. So performing differently - using the city differently or representing the forces that design the city critically - can provide new proposals on the nature of the city's future.

When I follow people I think more about wher they might be going then who they are. I make a note of and describe each object or reject while shopping. I record every gesture and the times they happen. I remember each street they follow, each turn and each hesitation. The stranger walking down the Boulevard of the Allies could be me if I watch them long enough.

There is a way in which official agencies can never really make anything truly festive; and then there is the way we pretend that they do in order to feel that there is some way to participate. Artists must see the tremendous contradictions of working with governmental or corporate agencies that reinvent the public life of an urbanism which increasingly belongs to fewer and

fewer people. Simultaneously, the reorganization of desire by art agencies into replaceable economic relationships hastens this limiting agenda. Perhaps these public events are created by power more for itself than for the people attending. Surely it's not really about convincing people of the false notions of progress and humanization. That's easy. What's really difficult is for power to act consistently in relationship to itself, to convince itself of its own faith in its immediate reproduction. Paradoxically, the new-found institutionalized terrain of community-based art practice often helps with this legitimization and normalization.

When they sing "This Land Is Your Land" at the Civic Arena it just brings tears to my eyes. Wow. You know we just all have so much to get from each other, if you just look around wherever you are and decide to interact--that changes your life. Just these thing when we are all together somewhere can change your life.

For Group Material the museum was always as much a public place as the plaza or the street. These are spaces where we represent ourselves to ourselves and make meaning in a way that is open to the scrutiny of groups and part of a social conversation. Increasingly there are fewer and fewer critical spaces that we can move into and around in, spaces that present fluid models of personality and affinities between people. Many of the strategies used by artists in the

past involved in institutional critique has become absorbed by forces in society like urban renewal programs, that are inimical and closed to progressive critical voices. It is crucial that artists are aware of the tendency of many public art programs to normalize their own members. As long as artists remain involved in this arena we must be careful not to reproduce the categories established by other forces.

halloween mask

\* *The projects discussed here are the collaborative effort of Group Material: the more recent work by Julie Ault, Thomas Eggerer, Jochen Klein and myself; the earlier work by Julie, Tim Rollins, Mundy McLaughlin, and myself. Many of the points of contact between the work and the issues I describe are speculations of my own.*