

Death to Law: Progressive Public Art in Chicago

By *Bert Stabler*

Guilt is one name for the nauseating burden we alternately carry and try to throw off, the price for having emerged from chaos, our isolation and protection from the abyss of everything. I've been inhaling lots of spray poison and caustic cleaning fumes, trying to slaughter cockroaches in my apartment (insert your own Naked Lunch reference). Along with going to a recent show that featured an unhealthy amount of incense (thanks to artist Justin Schaefer), this has kind of killed off my senses of taste and smell.

I am a chronically sleep-deprived art teacher in a Chicago public school, and it's been a tense two weeks, with the students being shut in classrooms between periods to keep them out of the post-fight arrests, and cleanup in the hallways afterwards. Finally there was a brutal stabbing in the school, which, understandably, freaked everyone out. This was the day I officially got miserably sick: sore throat, congested cough, dizziness, chills. I toughed it out at work for another day, and then went to a screening of violent animation at Green Lantern Gallery on February 7th.

I usually like stuff like that, and it was an amazing program. The piece

was UV (2003), by former Forcefield member Ara Peterson. It featured a montage of gore and splatter scenes, followed by kaleidoscopic animated day-glo abstractions morphing at strobe speed and officially burning away the protective coating around my fragile inner fetal-self. I left shuddering with hypothermic tremors that didn't subside until after a hot shower and a night under many blankets. As personal and "embodied" as my response was, it could be described as a political art experience.

Commenting on the short lifespan of small art spaces in Chicago, artist Salem Collo-Julín, keyholder of the experimental public space Mess Hall

and member of the Temporary Services collective, unintentionally spoke directly to my experience. Her inspired declaration: "You can't just open your door and hang something on the wall and serve beer on Friday nights and make a postcard and believe that all of that is going to be enough. There has to be a why, because that's the reason people come to art. It's not just the thing you do when nothing else works, it's a sickness that makes a fever that pushes us to dream up delirious visions, from which solutions can be formed."

So what is the proper way to make affecting art if you care about politics? Apparently political



< This Page: Pedagogical Factory: Exploring Strategies for an Educated City by the Stockyard Institute with AREA Chicago, July 22 – Sept. 23, 2007 at the Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago. Photo courtesy of Michelle Litvin

// i saw many who tried with
great effort and the best of intentions

to do everything possible to appease their conscience...

And yet they labored, the greater THEIR TERRORS BECAME. ///

— Martin Luther



cartoons are only noteworthy when they offend Muslims. Propaganda posters are still exciting, partially owing to and partially in spite of the efforts of Shepard Fairey (the "OBEY" guy). But other possibilities, more somatic and particulate, are pumping through the artsy body politic. The Chicago group Feel Tank collectively stated, "Feelings are produced and productive. They move around, circulate, get communicated. They can be contagious; they can be vehicles for a connection; they can be obstacles to a connection." While these concerns are social, the language of affective psychology places them rhetorically in the reflective habitus of fine art.

Like their American counterparts the Center for Tactical Magic, subRosa, the Center for Land Use Interpretation, Futurefarmers, Group Material, Learning Group, JAM, and Basekamp; as well as the Danish groups rum46, Parfyme, and YNKB; local groups Temporary Services, Feel Tank, InCUBATE and Material Exchange tend to only exhibit objects as evidence of a temporary or ongoing project. Rooted in an anarchist scavenger ethos, they share an empathy for incarcerated and homeless populations, and an interest in "interventionist" public performance, free publications, "generosity" giveaway events, micro-fundraising, hands-on skillsharing, subaltern urban planning, and low-tech sustainability - not to mention lots of indexing, mapping, cataloguing, and diagramming.

Feel Tank put together a group show titled "Patheogeographies" at Chicago's Gallery 400 last summer, for which "political catharsis"

could be seen as the unifying thread. The primary Feel Tank action was the Second Annual March of the Politically Depressed, which involved a large number of bathrobe-clad mopers converging on downtown Chicago with blank (and otherwise memorable) picket signs. Material Exchange provided a room full of used luggage for a group project called "Other People's Baggage," in which artists did suitcase-scaled installations (reminiscent of classic Fluxus works) evoking ineffable feelings and material circumstances of transience. Salem Collo-Julin organized S*M*A*S*H, an event in which participants got to take out their political frustrations by beating on a car with a sledgehammer. Laurie Jo Reynolds superimposed readings from prisoners' journals over images of astronauts in space. And artist and musician Dwayne Slightweight performed the gleeful "queer opera" "I Want to Know The Habits Of Other Girls," in which he conversed with his own prerecorded voice, flung plush figures about, and had audience members sing along with affirmational koans.

In the flight from orthodoxy, it seems that progressive artists are abandoning institutional critique (the attempt was initiated in the 1970s, by artists such as Hans Haacke and Dan Graham) to politically redirect art institutions from within. A political, public, autonomous approach to art making is now central to the mission of some of the largest European art mega-fairs, Manifesta and Documenta, and the performance-only American festival Performa. Artists and groups from Chicago are represented in this larger community, but in town, tactical

art making becomes indistinguishable from progressive education, activism, publishing, and funding, not to mention curating.

Kristen Cox works on the magazine AREA Chicago, does activist and artistic work through halo projects, and administers grassroots funding initiatives through the Crossroads Fund. Michael Bancroft oversees Cooperative Image Group, where he works with young people to create community gardens, do a cooking show on public-access cable, produce video and music, silkscreen T-shirts, and make fused-glass artwork to sell (in addition to other ingenious fundraisers). He recently held a major exhibit of student work at Open End Gallery in Chicago. Relevantly to the localist research concerns of tactical artists, the group Chicagoland/Calumet Underground Railroad Efforts does tours and holds events reflecting unrecognized regional history, and the Southeast Environmental Task Force leads public tours of dumping and waste-processing sites on the south side of Chicago. God's Gang, a group of former public housing residents led by Carolyn Thomas, works with the Heifer Project on urban agriculture projects. Beauty Turner, the co-founder of Residents' Journal, and also a former resident of public housing, has memorialized the Robert Taylor Homes through "the Ghetto Gallery" and her "Ghetto Bus Tours." This is a world in which genius is eschewed, roles are fluid, and study and sweat are the measures of achievement.

Along with public actions and projects, teaching, discussion, and interaction are central to the work

of tactical artists. Like Feel Tank, Mike Wolf and InCUBATE have both recently curated shows that showcase the projects of other artists working in a similar vein of radical research. Maybe the most ambitious recent local example of the progressive art pileup happened last summer, when the Stockyard Institute, a teaching organization run by James Duignan, as well as AREA (Activism, Research, Education, Art), led by Daniel Tucker, organized a celebration of these local and national efforts in an art show and event series at the Hyde Park Art Center, "Pedagogical Factory." There were field trips, panel talks, and a library of self-

published materials. Groups and individuals from Chicago and beyond gave presentations, led workshops, displayed projects, and held discussions on topics such as home brewing, reusing scrap technology, squatting urban gardens, mobile broadcasting and recording, radical history posters, and breakdancing.

Tucker was also central in the production of *Trashing the Neoliberal City: Autonomous Cultural Practices in Chicago 2000-2005*, a publication (obviously) dedicated to documenting the recent history of public oppositional culture that has become the city's preeminent art-

world face. "Trashing" documents the work of campaigns, groups, and events. These include the protests in front of the Wicker Park site for MTV's *Real World* reality show; the "This Is CHAos" project supporting public housing; the protest group Pink Bloque's exploration of "tactical flirting;" and other remarkable DIY festival events like *Pilot TV*, *Version*, and the Department of Space and Land Reclamation, all of which and whom sought to reverse trends of privatizing and silencing public and social spaces, and to address the needs of marginalized groups facing new threats. A great deal of information is made available online by the groups involved, and it should be

> **This Page:** *The spectacle of the Art War at the Merchandise Mart during Version>07 festival April 2007.*



taken advantage of by anyone excited about these new directions in activist culture. Trashing can be downloaded for free at <http://www.learningsite.info/NeoTrashing.pdf>.

Many progressive-art entities share members, collaborate on projects, and participate in group exchanges, creating connections with communities in the region and around the world. Looking toward the future of cataloguing tactical art, Chicago's InCUBATE group, who consider themselves arts administrators rather than artists, is working on the project "WikInCUBATE," an online "resource for all interested in discursive art, innovative politics, philosophy, the local, reinventing histories, doing it yourself, radical infrastructures, the internet as annotation of physical interactions, tactful technology, and more."

In 2001, curator Nato Thompson helped to mount the Department of Space and Land Reclamation festival in Chicago. At Mass MOCA in 2004, he put together "the Interventionists," the biggest American international museum survey of recent socially-engaged art to date. It featured several Chicago-based artists, among them Walead Bashty's fictional Atlas Group, the God Bless Graffiti Coalition, Haha, Michael Rakowitz, and Temporary Services. "The Interventionists" helped to spawn a lot of smaller related shows, and to define and bring attention to "autonomous cultural practices." But the history of public activist fine art goes back to the days of 1960s and 1970s feminist performance, Situationist actions, utopian initiatives, land art, and conceptual art. Progressive art collectives follow in

a long history of activist group work, such as the AIDS activism of General Idea and Gran Fury, and more recently the Critical Art Ensemble, who have become the center of considerable controversy over the arrest of member Steve Kurtz on flimsy anti-terrorism charges.

Chicago has its own proud history of politicized public artwork, dating back at least to the 1990s, when the city boasted the nonprofit agit-art organizations Randolph Street Gallery, NAME Gallery, and most enduringly, the Resource Center, a South Side group that focused on recycling and redistributing surplus and waste materials, as well as other green initiatives. Dan Peterman, who was associated with the Resource Center, has long held a prominent profile in the international art community. Recently, he took part in establishing the Experimental Station, a shared space built in order to continue the legacy of the 6100 S. Blackstone building, the community of collectively-run businesses, publications, and teaching organizations that burned down in 2001. Ken Dunn has kept the core mission of the Resource Center alive through a massive attempt to redirect unwanted materials into the hands of artists and teachers. This is the Creative Reuse Warehouse, a project that has been forced to change locations twice in the last ten years.

Tactical art collectives declared independence from the systems of patronage on which the traditional art world once depended, and in Chicago this schism has resulted in something of a Reformation/Counter-Reformation dustup. With the success of this public work in

national and international venues dwarfing the visibility of most other artists who both live and show work in Chicago, art-for-art's-sake Papists are on the defensive, accusing these groups of being politically ineffectual and distracting attention from "real" efforts toward social change—apparently, artists are to honor these movements by not participating in them. At the same time, many free events put on in newer spaces are borrowing from the neo-Woodstock atmosphere that tactical collectives have generated. This can be seen in the participatory work of Industry of the Ordinary, the recently departed Lucky Pierre, and the multisensory carnival vibe of art-and-music crash pads like Mr. City, the Butcher Shop, and the now-defunct Texas Ballroom. I think the viscerally affecting animation program I attended at Green Lantern definitely owes something to this emphasis on group enjoyment – and cringey catharsis.

Jon Stewart and Andrew Sullivan notwithstanding, I would say the mode of the "public intellectual" is basically dead, as applied to grand old authors like George Orwell, Richard Wright, Sinclair Lewis, and James Baldwin. Perhaps this is the void tactical practitioners are trying to fill. But even if it's not dead, if "making your art" means you create a moral statement that you try to enact in some context, it's hard to see why that's inherently invalid. A good-art-Protestant is concerned far less with "works" (products, results), than she is with "faith" (process, struggle, analysis). She deplores the decadence of images, and embraces traditions of non-hierarchical community and internal spiritual drive. Although I'm not

< Spread: View of *The Interventionists* exhibition at Mass MOCA

< Inset, Left to Right: Crowd at Mess Hall, Cube planter at MCA 12x12 show by Material Exchange, "Protestor" at the INT'L PARADE/POLITICALLY DEPRESSED-2003



immune to the charismatic ritual-and-altar allure of the white box, tactical artists have made it possible for art in these last days to have inner fire and a sense of provisional purpose, as opposed to a mute thrall before the rotting behemoth of commodified art-historical ornament.

And yet the emphasis on rigorous self-examination, as well as the nagging concern about efficacy, often ends up sowing a certain amount of doubt and interdenominational dissent. The anguish of reconciling unutterable inner life with ineffable universal Being, i.e. the confessional legacy of Martin Luther, is implicit in Psychological Prosthetics' Patheo-geographies exhibit. The presentation features optimistic products inadequate to mitigate disillusionment in the hopelessly corrupt, hypocritical, doomed modern world. These included "the 30 Second Rant Recorder, an electronic hand-made device to activate outrage, and the PP Band Aid device to bandage shame and soothe apathy."

Along with this quest for purity and authenticity, there is, despite the festive motif, some distrust in the tactical-art world of work that demonstrates technical skill, or allows any unseemly pleasure, visual or otherwise. In fact, there is quite a bit of distrust among these folks generally. One Calvinistic response I got while trolling for comments for this piece was a strong objection to my having (with unintentional hierarchical prejudice) described subscribers to a progressive-art listserve as "central" to the local progressive art community. Despite the political discomfort I discovered in stoner cartoons and incense

overload, many progressive artists sternly resist beautiful, ugly, and funny imagery. But while much dialogue in activist art circles is couched in tiresome programmatic rhetoric seemingly meant to appeal to foundations and the compilers of Routledge anthologies, there are progressive art visionaries willing to unclench the sphincter somewhat and work toward a celebratory atmosphere.

Dwayne Slightweight, the aforementioned creator and performer of "I Want to Know the Habits of Other Girls," is an artist whose multifaceted approach gives radiant evidence of love and hope as important elements to enliven the "faith" element of idealistic art. His response to the efficacy critique takes on the "political" definition: "Too often the only artwork and activist output that gets analyzed as political, whether by the audience or the artists themselves, is art that seems to have a very linear cause and effect line. Some of those tactics have a propagandist or militaristic or academic structure to them." In regard to making art, he says, "Making things to me is an act of hope that what do will have an effect on your surroundings, so having hope with another person/s is really the best way to hang out with people."

"Anything that happens outside yourself," he concludes, "is political!"

Slightweight is the sort of artist that the Chicago progressive-art world may need in order to maintain an enduring sense of purpose. "My desire or motivation for making anything and sharing it with the world," he says, "has pretty much always been

to create a situation in which we can experience some kind of utopia together, no matter how fleeting, ephemeral, or temporary." To clarify what may sound like dewy-eyed demagoguery, he continues, "Utopia isn't a gated community where the good can hang out, it's just the sheer effort to imagine how to get out of the mess we're in!" In the future, as Chicago native and No More Prisons author William "Upski" Wimsatt has noted, queers, women, youth, and people of color are the ones who will find ways to organize around new conceptions of universal truth, all based on small-scale interactions. Some may question whether this is politics per se and not instead a moral-spiritual pursuit, but I think these semantics are actually changing in the world at large.

This quest for a molten core of communal experience, which goes hand in hand with an incremental and instrumentalist approach, seems actually to echo the general sentiment of the electorate in this season. We see candidates indistinguishable on policy points being chosen for their charisma and visionary mantras on the one hand, and on the other, for the demographic muscle they might leverage in the future. Methodists, Presbyterians, and Lutherans all had different theological doctrines at one point, but are now the moderate swing voters cajoled by promoters and pundits they correctly distrust. Now seen as the populist faith of rural snake-baiting tent revivalists, Baptists were central to the civil rights movement, and are still organizing to fight poverty. Yet they, along with the crunchy, humanist, and well-heeled Quakers, are the descendents of



> Above: First annual PuttPutt show by Material Exchange.

militant New England iconoclasts. Both groups have sought vehicles of action, thoroughly integrating themselves into legislative lobbying, activist organizing, and the nonprofit sector. Tactical practitioners are also transitioning art into this ephemeral and mechanistic moral public space, but without any agreed-upon transcendent goal – neither "Christ" nor "the revolution." As Slightweight says, "Utopia isn't peace ... I think utopia is the struggle to end war."

The sniping at tactical artists by naysayers in the traditional gallery world reminds me of a discussion I had while in AmeriCorps. A straight-laced theater kid opined something to the effect that, "shopping at thrift stores is lame." I responded, "Shopping at Old Navy is lame too." But the sniping between progressive artists reminds me of the semester at Oberlin (indeed, some of these folks think they never left Oberlin) when the non-glamorous issue of need-blind admissions being eliminated was drowned out by the high-drama hype around what turned

out to be totally baseless perceptions of racist symbols appearing around campus. Effectiveness is overrated, but there is something to be said for having an actual target.

But, though in the realm of the ineffable, my odd illnesses were not hallucinations. Indeed, guilt is vital for a morally aware encounter with history, not something to be alternately repressed and wallowed in on behalf of everyone by those who "suffer" most from privilege. Loudmouthed, overeducated, white, straight men (like me) need to be the last people weighing in on everything, whether they're aging post-"punk" hipsters trying to maintain their underground respectability, or unemployed Trenchcoat-Mafia-type grad students with a chip on their shoulder about counter-hegemonic doxa. These are the Martin Luther figures of our era. Our rigid militancy has served its purpose.

Really, the work of socially engaged artists is neither monumental nor

insignificant. Michael Rakowitz's recent project to import Iraqi dates brings to mind another example of an ethical intervention in the market. Much like small but important initiatives like fair-trade coffee, tactical art is an easily derided but meaningful approach to integrate morality with economics in our murky post-industrial culture war. Tactical artists are carrying forward the new mythic missionary task of the avant-garde. Now that floodwalls have been breached and art and life have cross-infected, cells of micro-activists are trying to come up with cultural tools and resources for the unassimilated and the underclass. The parochial isolation of the art world is a perhaps insurmountable obstacle to making any large-scale impact. But the projects these artists take on—working on a garden, sharing free stuff, public performances, trading skills—make worthy attempts to build relationships with local communities, one shared experience at a time. ♣