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-Julin, 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...
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 pumping through the artsy body more somatic and particulate, are evidence of a temporary or ongoing tend to only exhibit objects as Temporary Services, Feel Tank, as well as the Danish groups rum46, Futurefarmers, Group Material, Center for Tactical Magic, subRosa, Like their American counterparts the reflective habitus of fine art. places them rhetorically in the can be obstacles to a connection.” But other possibilities, they offend Muslims. Propaganda feature mega-fairs, Mainfesta and Documen- of some of the largest European art making is now central to the mission public, autonomous approach to art institutions from within. A political, Graham) to politically redirect art attempt was initiated in the 1970s, by In the flight from orthodoxy, it seems that progressive artists are abandon- ding 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 Documen- ta, and the performance-only American festival Performa. Artists and groups from Chicago are represented in this larger context, but in town, tactical art making becomes indistinguish- able 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 leapup happened last summer, when the Stockyard Institute, a teaching organization run by James Duignan, as well as AREA (Activism, Research, Educa- tion, 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 Neo-liberal City: Auton- omous 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 informa- tion is made available online by the groups involved, and it should be...
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 “Wiki IncUBATE,” 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.

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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 duxrup. 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 Woodstock atmosphere that tactical collectives have generated. This can be seen in the participatory work of Industry of Atmosphere, the recently departed Judy Pfaff, 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.

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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 thral 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 Patho-geographies exhibit. The presentation features optimistic products inadequate to mitigate disillusionment in the hopelessly corrupt, hypocritical, doomed modern world. These included “the 30 Second Rain 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 folk’s generalities. One Calvinistic response I got while trolling for comments for this piece was a strong objection to the above artist’s work. The cabinet maker who “suffer” most from privilege. Loudmouthed, overeducated, white, straight men (like me) need to be the last people weighing in on every-thing, whether they’re aging post- “punk” hipster 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 import-ant initiatives like fair-trade coffee, tactical art is an easily derided but meaningful approach to integrate morality with economics in our mushy 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 unassembled and the underclass. The parochial isolation of the art world is perhaps insurmountable obstacle to making any large-scale impact. But the projects these artists take on—working on a garden, sharing free goods, public perfor-mances, trading skills—make worthy attempts to build relationship with local communities, one shared experience at a time.