

IN RESPONSE

By

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ABSTRACT

This paper is about three large-scale collaborative art projects created in 2009 and 2010: "IRT," "10," and "The Sweet Cheat." It establishes a background for the works and moves on to set them within the context of modern and post-modern art, discussing precedents in art history and other collectives and collaborations in New York from the last 10 years. The paper is particularly concerned with participation, collaboration, and experience.

1. INTRODUCTION (STARTING)

When did you start making art?

I don't want to answer that. Not directly. But I could say that I've tried to bring people together to make stuff for almost 20 years. I wouldn't have called it art back then. I might not now. But in college I published zines with big groups of extended friends and collaborators. At the time I was interested in Do-It-Yourself journalism. What I came to realize, eventually (and surprisingly), was that it was the Do-It-Yourself part that was more exciting to me than the journalism.

How do you mean?

For each issue we collaborated to make something beyond what we could make individually. We did it for free, for fun.

What happened?

I moved to San Francisco and started writing professionally. It seemed good at the time. I was writing, and I was contributing my work to be part of something bigger -- a newspaper.

Wait. Why are you writing this way?

Well, it's a particular style that I use to explain a newsletter I publish, on its website (I'm going to talk about that later). It's sort of a modified version of the format used for Frequently Asked Questions.

Yeah, but you are essentially interviewing yourself.

Right.

OK, that's kind of weird.

Sure. But it's really easy to read.

Weird.

Sure.

OK. Well then back to San Francisco.

I ended up tangentially connected to a subcurrent of art out there. A sort of participatory, DIY art scene that manifested in warehouses and parking lots. In that world everyone had a project. There were live game shows and underground movie palaces. A lot of people worked on this

stuff year round and would meet at the annual Burning Man festival in the Black Rock desert. One of the rules, back then, was no spectators. Everyone was expected to participate.

Oh god, you're not one of those guys who talks about Burning Man all the time are you?

Not even. There will be only one more reference to it in the rest of this paper.

OK good.

In 1999 I moved to New York. I didn't know how to find the same stuff that I cared about in San Francisco so I started an email newsletter, Nonsense, to keep track. Perhaps even facilitate. Because I soon found that it wasn't really enough to just keep track of what other people were doing. I needed to be a part of it myself. And so I started making stuff.

What kind of stuff?

Well events, mostly. In 2000 I started working with a group called the Madagascar Institute, and another called Dark Passage. With Madagascar I organized street events: short, hit-and-run participatory events like the Running of the Bulls in 2001, where artists created bulls out of carts and costumes and bicycles and chased people down the street, or the Condiment War in 2003, a battle among four art collectives on the streets of Brooklyn.

Why?

Well, part of the point was to work out in public, to get out in what seemed like an incredibly restrictive city that was changing very quickly. You were supposed to get a permit for everything in New York, and we thought that seemed ridiculous at best and probably unconstitutional at worst. We never asked for permission. It was a type of guerrilla theater. We just did it.

Where did art come in?

There are couple ways to answer that. One answer is that art is a convenient explanation. If someone asks why you are doing something stupid -- say, dressing up like a horse and riding a large tricycle across the Manhattan bridge -- it's easy to get them to accept it by saying it's an art project. Art, like journalism, gives you a permission slip to be interested in anything. You can call people on the phone in far away places and ask them to fill a crop duster with rose water and drop it on an audience at a rock festival. And if you say you're an artist, they'll consider it.

Convenient.

Indeed. However I ended up somewhere that I didn't really expect. A couple places. One was that I started thinking a lot about participating -- in art, in projects, in communities, in life, really.

It seemed like participation was some kind of key, a key to everything that I thought was important.

I also realized that participation is closely linked to collaboration, and that the projects we were working on were both responding to questions about the city, about art, about media and mediation, and asking them as well.

This is getting pretty general. You were talking about street events.

I did a lot of those in the early 2000s. With Madagascar I was also organizing large-scale art parties with thousands of people in huge spaces. And we started going to some festivals abroad, where we were shocked to find that other people thought we were real artists. We thought we were just making things that would be fun to play on at a festival, or at a party.

What happened?

The police started to crack down. Events were getting really big -- up to 3000 people at a party, or 1000 at a street event. Police busted large-scale parties. And neighborhoods were changing so fast that it was fairly difficult to get your hands on a big warehouse -- even to rent.

What did you do?

I did what I had always done, which was to respond to the conditions at hand. I started putting on smaller, clandestine events without asking for permission, like the Secret Dinner project. I tried to set up recurring events, like the community dinner Grub, that would allow people to have conversations about their communities. And I kept putting out my weekly newsletter.

Amid all that, I kept working on large, collaborative works, like the Mississippi River raft project the Miss Rockaway Armada, as an instigator, a primary collaborator, or simply a supporter.

And then?

Something that I said I'd never do again.

What?

School.

2. HISTORICAL REVIEW (THINKING)

OK, where do we go now?

This is the part of the essay where I bring in a bunch of obligatory references to a lot of artists who most people reading right now know extremely well. That is, I'm about to tell you something about the way that the moderns wanted to their art to break open our skulls and shock us out of our various complacencies -- social, religious, political, educational

Uh huh.

Of course you know all this, dear reader, and you know that it all fell apart, and that now we find ourselves adrift, somewhat, in small boat without a rudder on a giant, post-post-modern ocean.

This is seeming a little flip.

Well it is.

Narrow it down.

OK. I'm going to paraphrase an artist named Tom Sherman, who wrote a paper called "Artists' Behavior in the First Decade," in which he recounted the same material. So we're on the same page: Starting in the early 20th century, Marcel Duchamp attacks "retinal art" and quits painting. Dadaists rally against the logic of war. Surrealists parry with the bourgeoisie. Fluxus artists complain about the art establishment. And then Andy Warhol and Joseph Beuys say that anything can be art (like soup cans and rocks), echoing Duchamp.¹ That sentiment broke down into a series of conceptual artists who stretched the definition to include cutting holes in walls and shooting yourself with a pistol, among other things.

Sounds familiar.

Yes. It's a well established trajectory. It just so happens that it's a line of thought that allows a place for anyone to make art right now, including me.

That's not saying much, considering that you basically just said that anything can be art right now.

Well that's part of the confusion and anxiety of the time.

You have to start somewhere.

I'm interested in art that demands participation. The way I see it, it's a subject relevant to post-modernists and modernists alike, from artists as disparate as American installation artist Robert

Irwin and high modernist Marcel Duchamp. In Duchamp's often-quoted lecture, the Creative Act, he wrests control of art away from the artist and to the viewer. For him, it's the viewer who completes the artwork. "All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone," says Duchamp. "The spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualification and thus adds his contribution to the creative act."²

It seems to me that Irwin is saying the same thing. "I'm not trying to tell people what to do, or how to see, or what's right, or what's wrong," says Irwin in the film *The Beauty of Questions*. "I'm trying to set up a situation in which they see themselves perceiving and realize that they themselves are the magic."³

What's notable between the two is a validation of art made to move the viewer to experience art, as opposed to simply see it. (I'm thinking, in Duchamp's case, of the Large Glass, and the way that a viewer can see him or herself in the piece's reflection, and quickly becomes aware that he or she exists within the frame when the piece is viewed from the other side.)

It's significant that both artists are creating justification for works that are not paintings or drawings or even sculptures that would be recognized as art by any artist working before, well, Duchamp (examples: his readymade sculptures, art created by the artist choosing to call it art, and Irwin's atmospheric spaces, usually created on site and incorporating subtle lighting effects). Duchamp wanted to wrest art into an intellectual experience, or perhaps a rational one; Irwin wants to take art beyond language and argument.

That's a pretty surface read of what's going on in Irwin and Duchamp's work.

Maybe, but it's what they like to talk about when they talk about their own work. Other critics have of course gone into greater depth in infinite variations. To pick one, Chris Salter says that Irwin and his contemporary, the quieter, more focused installation artist James Turrell, were trying to "rupture" consciousness itself.

"There is something dynamic and transformative underlying the desire to generate a state of profound experience through the materiality of the barely seen and heard," writes Salter. "Sound and light as matter on the threshold of becoming is the stuff that Turrell and Irwin sought to elicit transformation, in both body and consciousness."⁴

His is a more nuanced explanation of, at times, extraordinarily subtle works. (I'm thinking of a piece of Turrell's that I saw at the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh in 2003, where we sat in a dark room for six minutes or so before we started to see little traces of light zipping across the room -- photons themselves, behaving battily.)

What's compels me, in addition the other parts of their work, is the use of specific spaces, particularly by Smithson and Turrell, what Irwin calls "operating in response."⁵

Or site-specific work.

Irwin also used the term "site conditioned/determined" work, where all sculpture considerations come from the site itself, as opposed to "site specific," where the sculpture is made with the site in mind, but ultimately is first a work that references the artist's own body of work, and then a work of its own environment. Turrell is infamously turning the Roden Crater in Arizona into an art installation. And Irwin created a tremendous volume of work in public space in conjunction with architects, in addition to both artists' pieces in austere museums, galleries, and project spaces.

That's two different sets of work.

Yes, and both are compelling, and in their own ways, uncompromising. But the site specific stuff, the projects where, as Irwin says, the artists let the space influence the creation of the work itself, is the more exciting.

Why?

Because this is where it all starts to add up for me. If I was going to make a series of declarations, putting words into these artists mouths, I'd say these are the lessons they offer:

1. Make work that pays attention to its surroundings.
2. Make work that makes viewers pay attention to their surroundings.
3. Make work that is connected to real life, to actual phenomena in the real world.
4. Make work that can be experienced -- not simply seen or heard or felt or thought about, but all of these things.
5. Make work that a viewer he or herself will complete by his or her own presence and observation.

I'd argue that this is what Gordon Matta-Clark was doing when he started going into abandoned warehouses in New York and cutting shapes in them in the early 1970s. Looking at a set of conditions. Thinking about what work could be made in them. Thinking about changing the way we see those spaces. And sometimes giving people a chance to get inside of those spaces, to experience them.

Matta-Clark's work was rooted in his reading of Guy Debord and the Situationists, and in ways he directly manifested his own versions of their concepts, in particular the premise that an artist is one who constructs situations.⁶

I thought he was just cutting houses in half with a Sawzall.

As the painter Susan Rothenberg wrote of that Matta-Clark sculpture, "Splitting," in New Jersey, "Gordon invited you into some very macabre participation ... Being in that house made you feel like you were entering another state. Schizophrenia, the earth's fragility, and full of wonder. It was so subtle at every level."⁷

Still, that's really an object, even if Rothenberg is talking about participation.

True. There are other projects with an even more pronounced connection to Situationist ideas. I'm thinking in particular of his project Food, a collectively run restaurant for and by artists, and the graffiti show that he curated in a public space, Washington Square Park.⁸ (That show was held by some to be one of the first to recognize graffiti as an artistic expression rather than wanton vandalism.)

Aren't there better expressions of Situationist thought?

Sure. One is Hakim Bey.

Who is relevant how?

I'm not simply talking about experience and participation. I'm also interested in work that creates a space for social change. I'd also suggest that the two aren't entirely separate, but I'm going to get to all of this in a minute.

For starts, in *Temporary Autonomous Zones*, published in 1985, Bey suggests that art, and even anti-art projects like Allan Kaprow's Happenings, have essentially failed to create any social change -- to rupture state control or capital's rigid structures. In his view, the state is so powerful, the corporate control so pervasive, that there is no longer a way to actively resist.

For Bey, the Temporary Autonomous Zone is an uprising that does not directly engage, a guerilla action that liberates and then dissolves before the state can crush it. "The TAZ is thus a perfect tactic for an era in which the State is omnipresent and all-powerful and yet simultaneously riddled with cracks and vacancies," he writes. "And because the TAZ is a microcosm of that 'anarchist dream' of a free culture, I can think of no better tactic by which to work toward that goal while at the same time experiencing some of its benefits here and now."⁹

The idea became a central text in the creation of two fraternal twins: the annual Burning Man festival in the Black Rock Desert,¹⁰ and London's chaotic, carnivalesque Reclaim the Streets parties.

While Burning Man became something of a "Do-It-Yourself World's Fair," full of emerging technologies created by its participants for one week in August, Reclaim the Streets inspired a generation of activists, including those who would help shut down the World Trade Organization's conference in Seattle in 1999.¹¹

Weren't you talking about art?

Well, yeah. I'm headed toward something here. It's about participation, and ...

Can you get back to something that might be in an art book?

How about Allan Kaprow?

The Happenings guy.

Yeah. Of course Allan Kaprow did not invent Happenings. What he invented was the word Happenings. It was a good name and it stuck. What Kaprow had meant, originally in 1959, was a sort of art event. He meant theater without a theater. He meant painting without canvas. He meant sculpture without the monuments left behind.¹²

Happenings were experiences. Happenings were collaborations. Happenings were interactions. Kaprow wanted to merge visual art and theater. He was deliberately trying to find language that did not belong to art or theater. And the word Happening stuck.¹³

By the late 1960s the word had taken on new meanings. The press picked up on it. Happenings became any congregation that was cool. Like a rock concert. The Happening became a Supremes song, an advertising buzz word, and a soft rock pop group with a 1966 hit called "Go Away Little Girl."

Those are not the kind of thing that Allan Kaprow had in mind when he came up with that word. So he quit. He eventually started producing Activities. Activities were smaller. More intimate. They were often barely prescriptive. Two people would call each other up and hang up the phone. Two people would take Polaroid pictures of each other.¹⁴

The point was to talk about art.

On a recorded interview I heard Kaprow say that he wanted to be the most modern artist ever.¹⁵ He was willing to do it even if that meant destroying art. Which he did. Later in his life he called

himself an Un-Artist. This is another way of pointing out that Kaprow was very consumed with art and the art world. Most of his early happenings occurred in galleries (often his own), and much of the writing about those happenings occurred in art journals and art books. And most of the people who attended and performed in his events were artists and other folks variously intertwined with the art world. This is sort of a problem if you are interested in everyday life and everyday people.

Kaprow's line of thought had come from multiple sources. There was John Cage, who Kaprow worked with at the New School between 1956 and 1958. Most people, including Kaprow, agree that it was actually Cage who presented the first proper Happening at Black Mountain in 1952, although of course it was not called that. From Cage and his experiments, Kaprow took the idea of indeterminacy as a valid form of organization. He also took Cage's demand for audience participation.

John Cage is a famous artist.

Indeed. Kaprow was also deeply influenced by American philosopher John Dewey, and in particular his 1934 book *Art as Experience*. Dewey said not only that raw experience should be the subject for art, but that the only way to get to it was to do it. Or, rather, "there is a unity of experience that can be expressed only as an experience."

And that means what?

It means, basically, that art is more than its objects. It is, instead, a process in which the maker takes into consideration those who will look at the object and how they will look at the object. Sort of like what Duchamp was talking about in the Creative Act.

OK, but I don't see how this is related to everything.

It's precedent. Dewey writes in *Art as Experience* that museums get in the way of the way an audience experiences art. So do institutions and commerce.¹⁶ Allan Kaprow seized on that idea and decided to create experiences in the world. And call them art.

And that got out of control?

Exactly. There is a voraciousness about art after modernism that allows for acceptance of everything -- particularly criticism of itself. And there is a retreat in Kaprow's work once he stopped organizing Happenings. He probably didn't see it that way. But his work became consciously poetic. It lost its ambition. In "Tail Wagging Dog," 1986, Kaprow rhapsodized about a game that he and another artist played in the hills, stepping on each other's shadows and

changing roles. He offered a set of definitions of participatory activity. In one of them, he says, participatory activity "is to be valued neither for its esthetic excellence nor for its good intentions to improve the world."

That seems like a good segue to relational aesthetics.

I was going to say the same thing. Because relational aesthetics carries on in that tradition -- sort of. It's not necessarily interested in "esthetic excellence," but it often is interested in good intentions.

How you mean?

Relational art is more than anything a grouping given to several artists by curator Nicholas Bourriaud. In 1998 he published a collection of essays called *Relational Aesthetics*. (It was translated into English in 2002.)

There is a less pretentious name for this stuff: social art. It basically means the same thing but is much easier to understand. The art world prefers relational art. Because, you know, who the hell cares what it means if it sounds smart?

Bourriaud says art, new art, relational art, models potential universes. He says it sets up social relationships. He understands this art as a way to free human exchange from capitalist exchange. "Art," he says, "is no longer seeking to represent utopias; rather, it is attempting to construct concrete spaces."¹⁷

What does he mean?

Rirkrit Tiravanija makes Thai soup in the gallery and leaves packets of instant soup when he's not there. Felix Gonzales-Torres leaves stacks of prints for museum-goers to take with them. In 1994 Jens Haaning broadcast funny stories over a loudspeaker in a Turkish square.

Bourriaud says these artists are "learning to inhabit the world in a better way, instead of trying to construct it based on a preconceived idea of historical evolution."¹⁸

This is getting a little dated.

True, but this kind of work has developed into shows at major institutions. For example, a much talked-about show at the Guggenheim by Berlin artist Tino Sehgal just closed in New York. In the show the audience had a series of short conversations about progress with people brought in by Sehgal to lead them through the museum. The conversations were almost entirely unscripted and thus different for each person, depending on the way he or she responds to simple questions. There were no objects in the show, and people were asked not to take photos.¹⁹

Fantastic.

Well sure. Mostly. Not everyone agrees, because, for one, a lot of the artists who make so-called relational work do so in galleries and museums. And that alone really narrows down who might experience artwork. (It's the kind of thing John Dewey would probably take issue with.)

Others, like critic Julia Svetlichnaja, have pointed out that relational art often presupposes that people are good. In "Relational Paradise as a Delusional Democracy" she writes that bad people fuck things up for everyone. And that *Relational Aesthetics* doesn't really know what to do about that. She also says that capitalism is persistent, and accommodates relational aesthetics by being, you know, relational.²⁰

What about Grant Kester?

The guy doesn't even have his own Wikipedia entry.²¹

Sure. But you can't comment on the quality of a person's ideas on ...

OK, OK. *Conversation Pieces* is good. That's his 2004 book, subtitled *Community and Communication in Modern Art*. In it, he makes a case for what he calls, somewhat blankly, "dialogical art," by which he means art that creates dialog. It's hard to imagine someone so smart leaving himself open to such an easy jab (doesn't all art create dialog?), but he insists. "Dialogical projects," he says, "unfold through a process of performative interaction."²²

What does that mean?

In one project, the Austrian art collective WochenKlausur sent politicians, sex workers, activists, and journalists out on a boat on Lake Zurich to talk about drug policy. Through a series of conversations in this relatively unusual place, the dialog eventually led to a sort of halfway house for prostitutes addicted to drugs.

Kester likes projects like these. Projects that have some sort of activist slant. He points out that a lot of other folks are interested in this kind of work -- in particular Bourriaud. Kester's take on it, however, is notably skewed toward projects with progressive politics.

What's interesting about Kester is that he really cares about the art, and he claims that the political angle often blinds critics who write about these projects. *Conversation Pieces*, then, is a book that attempts to deal with criticism on its way to talking about these projects.

Kester's first major point is to go after modernists, mostly for being big snobs. Starting with Cezanne, he take us through more than a century of artists and critics who not only disregard

public opinion, but who actively attempt to make work that will not be understood by anyone but a small elite world of art insiders.

It doesn't seem like it would be much of a revelation; proving that artists are snobby is like convincing people that water is wet. But Kester goes in deep, listing a series of critics who helped make sure modernist art would remain inscrutable, from Clive Bell and Roger Fry, to Clement Greenberg, to Jean-Francois Lyotard.

Why do they matter?

It's kind of a set up. The point is that in each case, the critics are egging on and responding to artists, trying to make sure that art remains in a separate realm from the clichéd, manipulative imagery of advertising, propaganda, and kitsch. (This happens primarily by celebrating work that demands a tremendous amount of leisure time to cultivate their appreciation.)

Kester says the critics and artists were all worried in their own ways that high art will be commodified or cheapened, and he takes some delight in reminding us that every form once championed by these critics ends up celebrated and part of the same artistic continuum that it originally sets itself in opposition.

What Kester is doing, plainly, is trying to prove "from the ground up" that dialogical art is art. One of his main targets is the critic Michael Fried, who, continuing along a path established by Greenberg, argues against what he calls "theatrical" works. In particular, he draws attention to the argument that sculptors like Donald Judd or Robert Smithson create sculptures that anticipate the way that a viewer will respond to them.

Kester's strategy for getting us to accept that dialogical work is art is to convince us that if we can accept the conceptual works of the late 60s and early 70s -- especially Allan Kaprow's Happenings, Dan Graham's video projects, and James Turrell's light installations -- then we can accept dialogical art. His reason is that these artists pulled art away from "optical experience" (uh, seeing), to a "interactive orientation to the viewer" (art made for people to be in and around).²³

There's something missing from this.

Of course. Kester is not simply trying to make a case for taking dialogical projects seriously. He's also trying to establish a critical vocabulary for discussing them. And really, really what he's getting at is that these artists are doing what artists do, even if their work doesn't end up as visual works or even objects.

Where does this leave us?

Well Kaprow killed Happenings. Relational aesthetics seems like a dead end. Temporary Autonomous Zones are similar to what Teddy Roosevelt said about rifles and voting: They depend on the quality of the user.

So what?

There are other possibilities within all this. Artist and activist Paul Chan takes all these things for granted. He does not make relational art but his art is relational. He makes things happen but he does not call them Happenings. His most fleeting work is temporary but is not autonomous.

Chan, who lives in New York, makes pretty animated videos. But he also works with several different activist groups on contemporary politics. For example, he traveled to Iraq at the start of the war and was arrested for protesting the 2004 Republican National Convention.

In 2007 he produced "Waiting for Godot in New Orleans" with Creative Time. It's this project that reconciles several of the ideas presented in this paper.

The play took place outdoors, for free, in devastated areas of New Orleans. Each night, the production began with a gumbo dinner for more than 500 people and a second line parade to the site of the production -- a street corner, outside. The play itself was directed and acted by professionals from the Classical Theater of Harlem.²⁴

Chan could have stopped there. Instead, he taught public school in New Orleans for several months before and after the production. He talked to everyone he could and organized panels and workshops and potluck dinners. And he created a shadow fund that would match the plays budget with donations to local groups.²⁵

Chan's project is additive. It is a multimedia project. It stacks things up on top of each other and gets more out of every element. It uses a central event as Kaprow might -- a reason for people to get together. To interact. To participate.

And it opens up space to relate. Like relational aesthetics. It creates real resources, right now.

It does not wait for utopia.

3. METHOD OF PROCEDURE (DOING)

So that's where your work fits in the broad context of modern and then contemporary art: Paul Chan, Allan Kaprow, Bey, Dewey?

Well no. I wouldn't say that my work fits in there at all. I like a lot of the stuff I talked about in the section above, and there's even more stuff that I didn't get into, like the sound walks of Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, and, of course the guerrilla sculptures of Gordon Matta-Clark.

But I think what I do only makes sense in the context of the community in which I work. Which is to say that to a certain degree, you can't really understand what I do without understanding something about the world from which it comes.

That being the definition of context.

Right. I mentioned this above, but for the last 10 years I have published a weekly newsletter called Nonsense NYC. Each week I send out an email with two dozen or so listings for independent events and happenings in New York. In some ways this is in and of itself an art project. It makes aesthetic choices (in an age of flash animation it is a plain text document), and other considerations (no listings of institutions like the Museum of Modern Art or the Brooklyn Art Museum, no matter how hip the show might be).

But it's mostly a service. My original intent was to connect people. To provide a sort of underground newspaper that would allow groups and individuals to promote their own events and to find audiences. But also to allow busy people -- people who were hard at work on their own events, deeply ensconced in their own world -- keep track of what other people like them are up to.

The artists who I admire most -- and they are almost always groups -- also combine some sort of real life service with the practice of making art. They often respond to a particular set of conditions rather than work within white box galleries. And they often make sure there are places for non-artists and artists of various crafts to come together on one project. Finally, among some of them is this particular idea that the art they are making is for the community they belong. For them, as the underground artist collective Secret Project Robot recently wrote, "The point of the underground scene, call it what you will, is not to be a stepping stone to 'making it big,' but a way in which to see the world."²⁶

How about an example?

The Flux Factory. They are a Queens organization that has been around since 1994. (They started in Brooklyn.) On the one hand, Flux is an actual space that provides housing for a dozen individuals. They have a gallery, workshops and studios, and a performance space. But they are also an art collective that organizes shows and makes all kinds of work. Often those projects include people who live in the collective space.

I like their work for two reasons. At their best, they respond to a particular situation or set of formal constraints. For example, when they found out that they would lose their living space, the collective decided that they would organize road trips for the summer. This began a series called Going Places Doing Stuff that has run for two summers. Each weekend, the collective rents a school bus and hires a driver. Then they ask an artist to lead a tour anywhere he or she wants to go. Forty participants arrive prepared for a day of adventure and the artist helms the trip. Trips have included explorations of abandoned subway tunnels, a visit with a Halal slaughterhouse, and a conversation with a former king of Ghana. (I have led two of these expeditions.)

Wait, how is that art?

In a lot of ways. It certainly follows the principles of relational aesthetics, outlined by Bourriaud. For him, relational art allows for "a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space."²⁷

Bourriaud is also useful for framing Flux's living space. "The role of artworks," he writes, "is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever scale chosen by the artist."

Fair enough.

The Madagascar Institute is a group that I have done extensive work with in the past. For several years, the combine (the leader of the group refuses to call it a collective) built large-scale sculptures, organized art parties, and created street events, or short, guerrilla performances in public space. One of the things that I always found particularly inspiring about the Madagascar Institute is the group's idea of the rotating general.

In many collaborative groups the group as a whole comes up with an idea using a democratic process (majority wins) or consensus decision-making (everybody agrees). Madagascar does something else. In essence, the group is an affiliation of skilled and unskilled workers, a sort of art army.

Where are you going with this?

The point is that Madagascar provides a sort of service for artists, and its members are willing to help out on some project because they know that they know that the group will be available for their own projects when they need the support. It allows for collaboration by a loose group of affiliates, and creates a space for artists and participants. You support someone else because you know that others will support you.

Both of the groups you're talking about have been around for more than 10 years. Are you falling out of touch?

Yes. But there are all kinds of people who continue to work this way. For example, the House of Yes. The House of Yes was started by a woman who wasn't yet 20. She rented a warehouse and filled it full of people. They threw parties and made costumes. And then the warehouse space burnt down when a toaster caught on fire.

They turned to their community and began to ask for money through a series of fundraising parties and performances. They begged and borrowed and fed the money into the building. Within a year and a half the group formalized and moved into a new raw warehouse.

The House of Yes is now one of the most vibrant art spaces in Brooklyn. Six artists and performers live on the top floor. There is a fabric workshop that hosts a group called Make Fun on the second floor. There is a small recording studio. And at the center of it is a venue called the Skybox with 30 foot ceilings and a grid for trapeze, silks, and other aerial performances. The House of Yes now offers classes as well as a venue for shows, and the community that uses the space often collaborate on collective works that provide opportunities for anyone to get involved.

Sounds great.

It is.

And so what you're saying ...

What I'm saying is that my context is my community -- the people who are creating space and resource for others as well as finding innovative ways to make new work that responds to a particular set of conditions.

Would what you do work outside New York?

Maybe. But to me it really feels like New York work. And by that, I mean that I make it as a response to a set of conditions in the city.

What do you mean?

Let's talk about culture. It's good, right? We have the best museums in the world. There's a thriving gallery scene. I can see live music every night of the week. We get all the good movies. There are even audiences for obscure dance and serious theater.

And if I miss any of this stuff it's my own fault. Because I have the Village Voice, Time Out, and the New York Press to make sense of my options every week. I can look at the listings in the New Yorker or find out what's going on in six daily newspapers. Plus, if I'm somewhat in the know, I can check in with Flavorpill or NY Happenings.

There's nothing wrong with any of this. I'm just like you. I love a good movie. And there's nothing like live music. I read the New Yorker listings every week and I have a three-year subscription to Time Out. I recognize there's a nicely greased machine that makes all of this work, and it means that a lot of people are getting paid to do what they love, or at least to kinda do what they used to love.

But you know what? It's boring. I love art just as much as you do, but it's boring.

This is kind of unforgivable. Culture should be more than what we do after dinner and before the bar. Because we can allow culture to be anything but boring. It's too important. It's us.

This is a little grand.

Everyone an artist, as Joseph Beuys would say.²⁸

But Beuys said that as a way of talking about participating in a society.

Exactly. My problems with culture in New York are not just the no dancing laws, or the parade permits, or the velvet ropes, all three of which fall somewhere between mildly annoying and distressing harbingers of a fascist doomstate.

My real issue is that we have turned culture into a commercial transaction. Culture is something we pay for. And culture in New York is complicit in this agreement. It wants your wallet -- and maybe two hours of your attention. At most it wants you to catch the witty reference to Wittgenstein.

Again, there are people to whom we should be paying attention. And there are people we should give our money to as well. But there's a ramification here that is constantly reinforced by what we call culture in New York and it's horribly destructive. We are constantly told that art is something other people do.

That's wrong. Art is too important to leave to the artists. I'm here to tell you that it will change your life. And if you'll forgive my sincerity, I also believe that it would change New York. And if we can change New York we can change the world.

So ...

So this is what I want: a self-determined, participatory culture based on primary experience and the pursuit of joy.

That's a mouthful.

I know. It sounds really pretentious.

How about an example?

How about "IRT," a play that I wrote for the New York City subway?

Why the subway?

A few years ago a friend of mine put on a play at an off-off-off Broadway theater. He rented the space for four weeks. It was not a fancy place. There were cobwebs on the lights and the room had a strange layout. It was the kind of theater that had been scrapped together for shows like his, sure, but in that go-go decade, space was at a premium -- especially for the arts.

He laid out \$10,000 of his own money. That was just the rent. He managed to get a rehearsal room for free, but there were all sorts of other costs, even for a show on the cheap: costumes, puppets, a projector, materials for the sets, pizza for the crew. I never asked, but I figure the show must have cost him at least \$15,000.

The play was a small disaster. It won a decent review in the Times, but it was a slight piece, full of whimsy, and he never really drew full houses. He lost big.

I remember feeling pretty indignant. How could a non-profit art space supposedly dedicated to independent theater charge so much? Ten thousand dollars is a lot of money. By comparison it was about half the money I was making in a year. For an art project.

I remember thinking, Why don't you just do the show in the subway?

Are you going to talk about this play?

Yes. That was the start of the idea. In New York the subway is where we all come together. It's probably the single best thing about our city -- one that we often take for granted -- and what makes us different from most any place I've ever been. The subway in Argentina is cooler, the Paris Metro is more romantic, and Tokyo is far more efficient, but we run 24 hours a day, seven

day a week, and you can get pretty much anywhere in the city for about \$2. It's one place in New York where a homeless woman can sit next to a billionaire -- if either of them can get a seat.

In the winter, the subway is one of the only public places where you can spend more than 15 minutes without freezing. I decided that I wanted to do something in the subway. That's how it started. Something.

What was it like to go to the show?

You and 29 other people picked up your ticket at a pizza place in Brooklyn. Our house manager pointed you to the nearby Borough Hall subway station. You found a band busking on the platform, and then a tour guide showed up a few minutes later. For the next two hours the guide led you and the rest of the audience on and off trains, from one station to the next. There were 10 scenes in the play, all stitched together with stories and anecdotes that provided a context for the action. Some of the scenes were on the trains themselves, and others happened in stations. Meanwhile, a cast and crew of roughly 30 people shadowed the audience, sending out actors, scenery, and props.

And this worked?

Yes. We did three tech and dress rehearsals and pulled off six shows across two weekends in January and February 2009.

Was it good?

When the show really worked it was transporting: You could forget where you were. Lifelong New Yorkers were whisked away, if not caught up in the narrative, then at least caught up in the event. Good art does one of two things: It shows you something that you've never seen before, or it takes something that you look at every day and shows it to you in a new way. We were trying to do both things. A few times, I think, we got there.

Did anything strange happen in the subway?

Yes. Every night. I think we were all shocked to find out that lots of people use stations as public bathrooms. Lots. We made friends with the station agent at Borough Hall. We also won over a bored cop and ran into one woman sitting in the same exact seat on the 6 train on four different nights. A crew of teenagers joined in at the end of the ballroom one time, and we had an old-timey dance party on the platform at 125th Street after one show.

Why a play?

Because I'd never seen one on the subway. I'd been a part of huge underground subway parties so I knew that it was possible to move crowds around. And I'd helped replace advertising in the cars with art with a group called Toyshop several years back, so I knew that the cars themselves were basically unmonitored.

Still, I didn't have any sense of form or content. I needed to do more research, to scout. So I went out with George Graham, a friend, one night just to look. Sometimes you have to look at a space that you use every day with another kind of eye. I tried to look away from what the space did and look for what could be done. That night I found a massive gate attached to a wall in the Fulton station. I looked at big overhead fans below Grand Central. We found Elizabeth Murray's colorful tile room at 59th Street. And there was an empty guard booth at 125th where I became transfixed by the security cam images scrolling across the monitor. I ended up using several of those spots in the play.

OK, so how do you get from a security camera to period melodrama set in 1904?

I wanted the play to be popular. That is, I wanted people to like it, people on the platforms and on the trains. I didn't want to make some sort of inscrutable art piece. I know that people like comedies and love stories. And I'm not funny enough for comedy.

I also figured that each scene should make sense unto itself. There could be a linear storyline, but I wanted people who caught just one scene to have a sense of what was going on. I was partially inspired Bertolt Brecht's idea that stock characters allow audiences to focus on political ideas, but even more so by the Victorian melodrama, where everyone knows the villain is the guy with the twisty moustache.

I started reading everything I could find about the subway. I went to the picture collection at the New York Public Library. I read about graffiti in the tunnels. I looked at New York Times archives about building the subway.

Somewhere amid all that research I read a story about the Mineola, the private subway car that belonged to subway financier August Belmont. The train car was outfitted with leather chairs and hot and cold running water among other amenities. I started wondering about what kind of person would actually build his own subway car in an era where immigrants were living 20 to a room in squalorous tenements. It seemed preposterous.

I decided that I wanted to write something about that era, when the subway was a great promise and a great struggle.

That's a subject, not a story.

True. I admit I didn't really know what to write about. I'd never written fiction, and the whole affair seemed a little too open-ended to me. I leaned back on my research. For years I had been obsessed with the story of Revs, the graffiti writer who wrote more than 200 pages from his journal on the walls of subway tunnels in the late 1990s. George, who scouted with me, suggested I transpose that story to the turn of the century. Then, all I had to do was figure out why someone would write on the tunnel walls. Everything clicked into place after that.

I plotted the entire thing more or less along one subway line. Each location would be a different scene -- I just had to figure out what happened in each of them.

Is there a political message? There's a lot about unions and capitalist ...

Much of the play is rooted in -- and steals from -- beloved anarchist texts from people like Emma Goldman and Myles Horton.²⁹ However, the real political message is that you should make art anywhere you can.

Get to the play.

OK. With part of a script and some locations in mind I started looking for collaborators, the key people who would make the play look great: set designer Robin Frohardt, Jonathan Jacobson for lighting, graphic designer Jason Engdahl, costumers Sarah McMillan and Violette Olympia ...

So a theater company?

Actually, no. But essentially yes. Most of the people I work with are friends, artists and creatively engaged people who live in New York. The actors were trained professionals, and we had a licensed New York City tour guide, but the rest of us didn't have much experience in theater. I taught myself by reading a lot and asking a bunch of questions.

You're kidding.

No. This was my first play. Yehuda Duenyas, a friend who works with the National Theater of the United States, suggested I read *A Sense of Direction* by American Conservatory Theatre director William Ball, and I based the entire process of rehearsing and performing on that book.

How did you find actors?

Easy. I said I was looking for actors. I wrote a note that explained that I was putting on a show in public space. I sent that call out to people I know, and I also advertised on Craigslist and

Nonsense NYC. There was no shortage of interest. Within a few minutes I was looking at several headshots, and I had been clear that it wasn't really a headshot kind of show.

I held all auditions underground, mostly in Penn Station around Thanksgiving. There were National Guardsmen with dogs and machine guns. They ignored us. I wanted to find out right away if actors had big voices or if they were worried about performing in public.

It's a weird thing, watching actors make characters into real people. I am used to working with great people, artists and creative people, and being amazed what they will bring into a project -- their building skills, the way they solve problems. Actors were something else. I never understood all the exercises and warm ups and rehearsals, but all that turned into characters who acted with each other, seemingly oblivious to an audience, like something was happening for the first time. I was impressed.

What about the guide?

I found Julie Wiener through Matt Levy, who runs a tour company in New York. I told him I was looking for the best female tour guide in the city -- the play was already distinctly male -- and he pointed to her. She showed up to the audition in sneakers and huge hoop earrings and told me that the dirt excavated from the New York subways was used to fill out Ellis Island. She got the job instantly, and I continued to tell her that working with her was the smartest decision I made across the entire play.

Julie, a licensed tour guide who usually works on busses and water taxis, developed most of the subway stories on her own. She researched stacks of books and came up with a few topics and then several anecdotes. Her talent, in addition to her extremely loud voice, is her timing. If we were waiting on a platform for a particularly late train, and she was talking about building the original subway, she would spin out successive details, going further and further into Boss Tweed's corruption, what traffic patterns were like in 1895, or a top secret underground train that ran across a block of Manhattan propelled by a giant fan. Or, if our ride was about to pull in, she could wrap a story in 15 seconds, and no one in the audience would know that she had more material. She's a pro.

Where did you rehearse?

In the subway, of course. The actors were incredibly brave. Several times they jumped on to trains full of commuters and launched into scenes at full volume, without the benefit of lights, costumes, or an interested audience. Most of the time people smiled and watched them run the scene. Some never looked up from their crossword puzzles. And occasionally someone would

get up and walk to the other side of the train. We also did a tech rehearsal and two full dress rehearsals right before the show. We wanted to make sure that the production seemed effortless to the audience.

How did you pay for the show?

The show paid for itself. I took a job putting up Christmas decorations to raise some cash up front. I gave \$600 to the set builders and \$600 to the costumers. I spent \$480 on Metrocards for the actors, and about \$200 for rehearsal space. All of that was covered by ticket sales at \$10 apiece. The whole crew worked for free, and the actors took a hundred bucks each for their seven weeks of rehearsals and performances. There were some other costs -- for wine and posters and stuff -- and most of that was covered by poster sales. We didn't get paid, but we put on an affordable show in New York on our own terms and didn't lose our own money.

Shouldn't people get paid for their art?

Yes.

But ...

Art starts from a place of generosity -- especially collaborative art. You give it away.

But you charged for tickets. How do you charge for something that happens in public?

The show had several audiences. The primary audience paid \$10 for a ticket online and covered the budget. The secondary audience was anyone who happened to be in a station or on a train during the show. Sometimes (rarely) those people would join our audience and follow us for a few scenes. But the play was structured so that each scene was more or less hermetic -- you could understand what was going on if you joined in at any point.

How did people find out about the show?

I advertised the show briefly on Nonsense NYC. I also sent out email press releases and we made posters. Mostly though the show was a word-of-mouth affair. I sold out of tickets for six shows in an hour, and one of the hardest things in the production was to fend off crashers and keep the audience small enough that everyone would be able to see and hear all the scenes.

Did you get permission?

In a word, no. Honestly, I expected some problems from authorities, from either the Metropolitan Transit Authority or the New York Police. I did a fair amount of research on the matter and discovered that there are specific laws that allow people to perform in the subway

system. Music -- even amplified music -- is allowed. Cameras are also allowed, even though there was a short-lived attempt to ban them a few years ago. This play did only two things outside the rules: performing on trains and using a projector. New Yorkers are pretty used to the first, with the constantly cycling mariachis and break-dancing children, and the video screening lasted for fewer than five minutes.

Of course most New Yorkers know that the police aren't always up to date on rules and regulations. Since at least the Gulliani era, the police will write you a tickets for disorderly conduct for pretty much anything that they don't like. A few months later a judge will generally drop the ticket, although you still have to suffer waiting in line and a morning of New York bureaucracy to beat the wrap. If you put on events in public in New York you get used to the cycle. The consequences are often annoying but rarely prohibitive.

My strategy was to always have at least one person, Kim Couchot, who was designated to talk with authorities. She was well versed in rules and regulations and carried copies of them in her bag. Her goal was always to stall for long enough for the actors to finish the scene. Across nine performances we had only one problem, when our audience was taking up too much space in a transfer hallway in Fulton station. The MTA employee told us we couldn't block the hallway. We agreed, finished the scene, and left right away.

This all brings up a few interesting points. First, this was the question that everyone asked ...

Are you getting permission?

Right. My answer: No, but I don't think we're doing anything wrong.

I don't want to get too carried away, but it's actually a pretty devastating question in a country that prides itself on freedom, and specifically the freedom to assemble in public.

The question has implications for the arts as well. Young artists in New York are always asking for permission of some type. We ask for gallery shows, grants, residencies, studios, MFAs, or rehearsal space from an ever-expanding assembly of gallerists, nonprofit administrators, publishers, universities, and curators -- professional gatekeepers all.

Why don't we stop asking for permission to make art? For permission to make culture? Why don't we just engage directly?

A culture of permission demands professionals. It infantilizes artists. It can be devastating in particular to emerging artists, people who want to take chances, who don't have access to huge

budgets or serious infrastructure. We ask and we wait. And projects sit on the shelf, or never make it out of the studio share.

Meanwhile, spectacular artists drive up ticket prices -- and expectations. And they help widen the divide between the people on stage and the people paying for a ticket. All this helps reduce culture to a transaction. We relegate art-making or culture-making to the professionals. Allow the institutions to say, "This is important. Pay \$40 to come and see the production at BAM." So the only roles for art become professional artist, professional curator, and major funders. The public gets to participate only with their wallets.

I thought you said you weren't going to get carried away ...

I said I didn't want to. The thing is, culture and art making are far too important to be left to the professionals. This is clear in a place like New Orleans where everyone participates in his or her own version of Mardi Gras. Sure, you can go to the big parades with sponsored floats made by paid craftspeople and topped by celebrities. But most people also create their own floats or play in bands in their neighborhood's own parades, and the Mardi Gras Indians -- the ultimate independent artists -- steal every show.

This is all related. To me, a play like "IRT" -- really, a site-specific performance like "IRT," is intended to pull art off that stage, away from that black box, and out of that gallery. It puts art and culture in a place where the implicit message is that you -- the audience, the people on the subway platform -- have access to this same place. All the world's a stage, sure. Your stage.

What about press?

Press is one of the ways we told this story. Only 180 people could come to this show. Probably hundreds more saw a scene or two on a platform or in a train car. So I used the press to extend the audience of this show. And it worked. There were articles in the New York Times and the New York Post as well as Japanese newspapers, an Israeli magazine, German radio, and English television.

What did they say?

A lot of the coverage delivered a light human interest angle. That's fine. Oddly, one of our favorite stories -- and one of the most analytical -- was published on a blog called This Material World by Sean Fraga, a student at Yale who never actually saw the show. Here's some of what he wrote:

"This is reminiscent of, but not exactly similar to, [Paul Chan's] production of *Waiting for Godot* that was staged in Lower Ninth Ward after Hurricane Katrina. ...

I.R.T. is different. It was purpose-written for the space in which it is performed, so the moments of serendipitous connection between the text and the space will be different, a little muted, a little planned. Still clever, but with a self-consciousness to this very public performance: It is meant to be watched, the audience and players are clearly defined, and the frame of theatricality circumscribes the entire performance. (Contrast that with Joshua Bell's performance in a DC Metro station to see how passers-by respond to art without a frame.) Like *Godot*, I.R.T. gives its audience a lens, but the lens in this case is more like a pair of X-Ray Goggles, allowing the audience to see history and detail in the ordinarily mundane world of New York City public transit."

Is that right?

In better moments, yes. I was trying to change what we see every day.

Is that the point?

It's one of the points. The main point is to make stuff. To put on plays. To work with your friends. To make your own culture in the place where you live.

Which is probably a good place to switch to talking about 10, the 10-year Nonsense anniversary event.

I'll celebrate 10 years of the Nonsense list in the Fall of 2010. But the timing was too good in 2009 to pass it up, what with the support of RPI and a lot of access to sound systems and other equipment.

So it was the nine-year anniversary?

Yeah, doesn't have the same ring does it?

No.

My concern from the very start was that in celebrating 10-years of Nonsense that we would celebrate 10 years of the past -- which leaves a lot of people out. There's a constant refrain in New York that all the cool stuff ended -- just before you got there. What I wanted to celebrate was an active thing, a group of people making things now.

Earlier that year I'd been impressed by "Signs of Change," a poster show curated by Josh MacPhee and Dara Greenwald. I liked the way it took posters from disparate political groups and presented them on the same wall space, in the same paper format, making events that took place

continents away seem part of the same thing. I also thought it would be fun to actually see events that are represented on Nonsense only in text.

I figured I could do something similar by asking in a public call for groups and individuals who had posted on Nonsense in the last 10 years to contribute a poster. It seemed like a fine idea, but then I imagined the opening -- a bunch of people looking at posters for events that they had mostly missed. It didn't seem like a celebration of community or possibility; it felt like nostalgia.

I'd recently read *Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy*, by Stephen Duncombe. In it, he says that the left, as a political movement, needs to dream up impossible goals. He cites two: Martin Luther King's speech invoking the promised land, and the agit-prop activist Reverend Billy, who asks his audiences to stop shopping.

I think there's always a dialog between artists and activists, and so I took Duncombe's idea and asked artists what kind of cultural events they'd like to see on the Nonsense list in the next 10 years in New York.

What happened?

It worked. More than 75 people and groups participated. One group said it wanted to see swimming races in the Gowanus Canal, currently a superfund site. Others simply imagined larger venues for their projects. Still more imagined the moon, literally a party on it. And among all the posters, and all the people looking at the posters, was a real dialog about creating the kind of culture that we want to see in New York in the next 10 years. A culture that could, in many cases, be created by the people in that room.

So your big celebration of 10 years of weird art and culture, street art and puppet shows, bike rodeos and brick tours, was a poster show?

Yeah, but it didn't seem like enough. And when it turned out that the Third Ward gallery and art space was getting ready to open up a new part of their building that same weekend we jumped at the opportunity -- even though it would mean dismantling a woodshop and cleaning out a 8,000 square foot space the week before.

I felt like the night demanded something more than a theme party. There had been theme parties on the list for years. What I wanted to do was to create a physical manifestation of the list itself. For one night.

I talked to as many people as I could, searching for ideas. There were good ones, like a flashlight party, and some corny stuff that we seriously considered in a fit of desperation, like a party all about balls. You know, like a Ball Ball.

You're kidding.

I wish. But in the end, working from ideas from Jessica Delfino (a regular from the list) and longtime collaborator Ryan O'Connor, I came up with a sort of one-night Fringe Festival, with simultaneous shows on several stages. The plan was a show starting every five minutes for four hours, no show lasting more than 15 minutes, played for small audiences from 1-15 people.

No way.

The crazy thing was that we made it work. Audiences started on the main floor with tickets to little shows -- a pillow fight, say, or a clothing swap, and were escorted upstairs where there were six different stages, each designed by a different artist. The stages weren't in distinct sound environments, however, and so there were dozens of clashes throughout the night, "Ladies and Gentlemen" followed by "Ladies and Gentlemen!"

After four hours the premise had spun out of control. Shows with an audience of five were being watched by hundreds. We turned off all the lights and had a huge dance party that went into the early morning -- still the best participatory event around.

Didn't you just describe a party?

Yes. A really good one.

And so where's the art?

Actually I could argue that the entire thing was art -- and not just the poster show. The night was a performance. A massive collaboration among hundreds of participants. A dialog about the culture. A stage for anyone to perform. It seemed as prescriptive as a Kaprow Happening if not as indeterminate as a John Cage score.

Well.

Well yes.

And that leads to.

The thesis project.

4. DISCUSSION (THESISING)

Are you going back to the subway?

No.

But you could be the subway theater guy.

Exactly.

Then what?

"The Sweet Cheat."

What?

"The Sweet Cheat" is a play. Actually, it's a trespass. The story is adapted from a short story called "The Albertine Notes" by Rick Moody.

Where does "The Sweet Cheat" take place?

The story takes place in New York City after a suitcase bomb flattens most of Manhattan. A quarter of the population is addicted to a drug called Albertine, a drug that allows its users perfect memory recall. Take it and you relive the past, perfectly. A reporter, Kevin Lee, gets an assignment to find out if it's true that you can get to the future on it.

Whoa.

Whoa.

And where does it happen?

The trespass takes place in a massive power plant crumbling into the Hudson River, just north of New York City.

So your thesis project takes place in an abandoned building?

Yes. That's why it's called a trespass.

So to see it you had to go to that site?

Yes. Sort of. It was actually a two-part project. The second and final part was the show in the abandoned building. As an audience member you met a conductor at Grand Central Station without knowing where you were going. He led you to a train. A half hour later you arrived at the abandoned building.

The first part was a far more conventional table reading in the West Hall auditorium in Troy, New York.

Why two parts?

It's a process. A reading is sometimes used in theater for producers or theaters to decide if they want to produce a play, since a script needs to be heard out loud. A reading can also be used in theater and sometimes in film as a sort of milestone signifying that dozens of elements have been put in place -- actors, designers, a script, a budget. It is often the marker of a phase change between pre-production and production. This is what I was after in the table reading I organized.

What happened?

Seven actors -- Monica Hunken, Hannah Corrigan, Ben Cerf, E. James Ford, M Scrivo, Lizzie Steelheart, and Helen Buyniski -- traveled up from New York for the show. Albany actor Gregor Wynnyczuk read the lead part for Trevor Zhou, who was out of town on a job. I introduced the story and explained that the play would take place in an abandoned building and that the audience would walk from room to room in order to watch each scene.

During the reading I projected photographs of the actual building or production drawings of what the sets would look like. I also projected three short videos -- flashbacks to a time before the explosion (more on those in a minute). I played a couple of music pieces composed for the play, showed a mock up of the poster, and explained how a live phone call would be used during the show.

What did you learn?

I learned that the script worked. I learned that the actors were discovering their characters. I learned that the multimedia elements were on track, and that they benefited from good projection and good sound. I learned that some of the sound needed to be EQed. And I learned, ultimately, that the production would not work without the building itself.

Why?

For two reasons. The first is that the play's script -- unlike the short story -- does not dwell on the destruction of New York. This is because the building told that story on its own. However, in the table reading, it was often difficult to imagine the stakes involved. The second reason is a little more abstract.

Go ahead.

Well, it's that tough question that came up earlier in this paper.

Where's the art?

Yes.

Because the whole thing sounds pretty conventional.

It was. It was almost conservative. Actors lit up on stage. Audiences in a darkened auditorium. The division between the two exact.

Conventional.

The second phase was almost exactly opposite. The actual show was charged by the real world, the physical world, where broken glass crunched under your feet. Where beams of light cut through broken windows. Where actor's voices echoed with shifting reverb. There's something that happens when you go into a place like that old building. It overwhelms you. It is very much an experience.

And.

And so if I can connect a story to an experience, well, that's something.

It sounds familiar.

This project is the same as "IRT" in many ways: It takes its viewers somewhere else. It demands participation and complicity -- legally and physically. Also, it starts out on a train, with Jim Ford performing a prologue to the audience, same as "IRT."

Did you ask for permission to work in the building?

Yes, and I felt a little sheepish about it, given the points made in the section above. The difference between this site and the subway is that the subway is public space where we shouldn't have to ask for permission. The building, on the other hand, is privately owned. And logistically I wanted to be able to set up infrastructure for a richer sound, video, and lighting environment.

But you didn't get it?

No. First, we asked a developer who was going under in the mortgage crisis. Then we couldn't find the actual owner.

Bet you didn't try very hard.

True.

But you did it anyway.

Right. And we scaled back on some of the infrastructure that we'd originally wanted -- like large video screens, rappelling lines, and eight-channel sound systems.

Did you ask Rick Moody for permission to put on the play?

Actually, yes.

And what did he say?

He said that he couldn't give me the rights, but that I could do it.

Pardon?

Film and performance rights are expensive. He assured me that I couldn't afford them. But he told me that I could put up the play for small audiences as long as I changed the name and made sure that his agent never found out that I'd adapted it. He said that he wouldn't get in my way. And then he said that we'd never ever met.

Why did you call it "The Sweet Cheat?"

This is kind of a nerdy answer: Albertine is the name of a character in Marcel Proust's seven-book *In Search of Lost Time*. She's the girl who got away. The sixth volume of Proust's novel is titled *Albertine Disparue*. For some reason, English translators have given the book a few alternative titles: *Albertine Gone*, *The Fugitive*, and *The Sweet Cheat Gone*. I chose the *Sweet Cheat* in order to maintain the connection to Proust, the standard-bearer of fiction about memory.

Did anyone get it?

It doesn't matter really. This play allowed for a tremendous amount of detail from a huge crew of artists. For example, designer Jason Engdahl designed a prescription label for the Albertine bottles full of riddles and secret messages (he generated his own bar code) and then assembled several stickers and decals so that each person would get a physical object from each performance. Details like these were everywhere in this production. Not only do they make the production better, but they help foster an environment for collaboration where artists want to participate by adding something of their own to the show. It's very important to a project like this.

Which came first? The play or the power plant?

They were independent of each other. I'd ready the story years ago, when it was published in *McSweeney's* in 2002, and always wanted to do something with it. I was obsessed. It was one of those stories that I would pass around to my friends and get frustrated when they didn't read it.

My second thought was some sort of media version of it with flashbacks like those in the French art house-classic Chris Marker film *La Jetee*. Both ideas morphed into something far more complex. For me, the short story is perfect for talking about the importance of stories, and, I think, the problem of living within them. And the way the story loops back on itself is a perfect analog for the kind of art experience I am always trying to create -- one that allows its observers to make choices and participate, in art and in life.

Later I went to the power plant (after years of hearing about it from urban explorers), and decided immediately that I wanted to do something in the space. The most important thing, I thought, was just that people would get a chance to see the building -- a crumbling relic designed by some of the same architects who had worked on Grand Central Station. I'd originally thought of reprising the Secret Dinner project, but felt that the site would be better used for something far more immersive.

I started imagining that space as a kind of set. It was so bleak. The fallen grandeur of it all conveyed a real loss. It made me wonder how something so magnificent could be left behind -- and, if that building, what else? More than anything I wanted to show it to people. It was the same impulse I had with the original story: *Would you look at this*.

I decided that I could probably stage some sort of live version of the story. The audience probably wouldn't have much trouble imagining themselves in a bombed-out New York in that building. At some point the two came together.

And then what?

I began to assemble collaborators. I talked with George Graham about what memory would sound like. About creating a soundscape that referenced the building itself. Sarah McMillan came on again for costumes, looking for inspiration in the clothes people wear after disasters from Chernobyl to Katrina. Robyn Hasty came up with plans to construct sets out of materials found on site. And Tod Seelie took pictures for the flashback scenes.

What are you doing here? In the big picture?

It's connected to the subway play. It's connected to the idea that art should happen anywhere and everywhere. That it's a disservice to confine it to black boxes and fancy galleries.

Yeah, but you could have done it in a public park if that's all you care about.

But the space is extraordinary. It's an experience on its own. It's hard to convey this in writing. It's so beautiful. And *dramatic*. And, as an audience member, you're in this place you're not

supposed to be, faced with the task of making sure you don't fall 20 feet into a pit, and every part of your body is on pins.

In what ways did the show play with the building?

In every way. Again, it wouldn't have worked as a play in a real theater. The show played to every sense. George Graham composed music around the sounds of the space and EQed it to resonate in the turbine hall. A character would start into a speech and you would hear a train in the distance, followed by the sound of birds flapping above, and then you'd see an actual bird soar through the building --lured there by seed put out by lighting designer Jason Sinopoli.

Jason also threw fine dust into the air to catch the sunlight for the first scene in the turbine hall. He and Mark Krawczuk lit incense to smoke up the stage. These touches were all over the place: Serra Victoria Bothwell Fels littered little blue Albertine bottles and eye droppers across the various sets. She took a note in the short story about signs grad students used to mark time travel and developed her own system. She then made tags and pasted up posters that blended into the graffiti throughout the building. Dylan Gauthier, who acted as Addict Number One in one of the videos, brought a small rowboat to pick up Kevin Lee at the end of the play, using the Hudson river and a crumbling old dock. And Sarah McMillan, who is kind of a genius as a costumer, dressed everyone who was working on the crew as bike messengers who could be henchman in the antagonist's gang. That way, when the audience would catch a flash of someone moving through a doorway outside a scene, an audience could read that action as part of the plot. All these elements together -- it was a dizzying.

Did the building overwhelm the story?

Yes. But less than I expected. Originally I thought that different people would have different experiences with the play -- that some people would witness certain scenes and others might not. But we figured out a way to really move the audience from place to place and they focused on the story itself to a surprising degree. The actors did a tremendous job of demanding attention and holding on to it once they had it.

How did you get into the building itself?

Julia Solis, from the urban exploration group Dark Passage, told me once that if there's a fence there's a hole in it. We found the holes.

And the audience?

We brought them through a gate into an overgrown courtyard. Once we were all in, we locked the gate behind us and climbed a few flights of stairs in a relatively modest brick structure with fire tiles on the floor and walls covered with graffiti. The audience walked past Cassandra, sitting on a swing, through a doorway, and into a large room, dim from the steel window covers.

It was still daylight out?

Yes. We wanted to light up the building, and move people around with flashlights, but we decided the building was just too dodgy for that. We decided on late afternoon light to make everyone look pretty -- and because we thought 5-7:30 pm seemed like dead time for both police and real estate agents.

Speaking of which ...

Nope. No cops. But we did have one run-in with a broker and a developer.

What happened?

During our rehearsal period we had a few field trips into the building -- to scout, to rehearse, to build. During one of them, Robyn Hasty was working on sets when she ran into two guys wearing hard hats.

And?

They wanted to know what she was doing.

And?

She said she was exploring the building.

And?

Well, the broker called the owner of the building and put Robyn on the phone.

And?

He chewed her out, told her she was trespassing, and said that he'd call the cops next time. She apologized and walked.

Then what happened?

We decided at that point that we had been a bit sloppy. We had been running around the building for hours like we owned it. We climbed out of open windows talking loudly and ambled up to the train platform like no one was watching. But after Robyn got caught the stakes certainly seemed higher.

We decided to make a few changes. First, we cancelled all trips into the building that were not specifically for performance -- four shows and one dress rehearsal with a half-size audience. That meant that actors couldn't go up to rehearse, and Robyn didn't get all the time she needed to finish, and we didn't get a chance to repair the sketchiest places on the buildings dangerous main staircase. That also meant that we cancelled the tech rehearsal that had been planned for the building itself and instead rehearsed in the park next to the building with diagrams of the space made out of marking flags and pink tape. There was a lot of pantomime going on that afternoon; it was our *Dogville* moment. I realized if we could convince ourselves that we were moving around a bombed-out New York that we could probably do it with a massive relic of industry to support us.

We made one final adjustment. Three ins and outs for every show. The crew went into the building at 4, the audience went in at 5, and the audience and crew left the building together in time to catch the 7:30 train back to New York.

What's the significance of that?

It minimized the times that a passerby might see people coming and going. Interestingly, some audiences felt that it was a sort of leveling between the audience and the cast and crew -- that we came in separate but left together and rode the same train back to the city. The informal party and conversations about the performance on the train offered a pinch of community theater that no one had really planned. Mark provided tea, coffee, and chocolate.

You mentioned wanting to shore up the staircase. What did you do to protect the audience?

Not much, to be honest. I mean, people could have been seriously hurt. We tried to take this very clear at several points. For example, the original press announcement said the show was dangerous. Once someone bought a ticket they also received warnings in several emails. We told everyone to wear good shoes, to leave big bags at home, and that ultimately they had to be responsible for their own safety.

Then, on the train ride up to the site, before the show officially began with Jim Ford's prologue, actor Marc Scrivo talked to small groups of people and gave them three more safety tips: maintain three points of contact, pay attention at all times, don't just follow others. And then once we were on site we would point out various hazards, like missing stairs or holes in the floor. We wanted to make every warning possible, but ultimately leave the risk up to the audience.

Is that part of it?

Yes. In a way. I mean, I worry like hell that someone will get hurt at one of my events. And I know that it will probably happen. But there are risks in real life that we take all the time, and they're often worth it -- especially when we understand the implications and make the decisions ourselves.

You're getting carried away again.

I'm willing to take risks to see something beautiful -- to be a part of something. It makes my life better. I trust other people to make those decisions for themselves. That's all.

Did the audience agree?

Some people thought we were overstating the dangerous parts of the building to make the play seem scarier, then realized that we had probably understated them. Some said that they were afraid of heights. Others said they wanted to take more risks in their life because of the play.

Who was afraid of heights?

Actually Rick Moody.

He came?

Yes.

What did he say?

He said the play was wildly ambitious and that we actually pulled it off.

That's pretty nice.

And he said this other thing too:

I am as unreliable as Kevin Lee when I talk about your piece, and so there's really no point in saying anything. When I am saying I was moved I am saying I did have ANY NUMBER OF TIMES moments during the play when I felt the hairs-on-the-back-of-my-neck as in all brushes with the uncanny, and they had a lot to do with the tableaux of various personages and with the decisive melancholy of the setting and with the Hudson. The uncanny is good, and is important.

That's a pretty good place to finish.

I agree.

5. CONCLUSIONS (FUTURING)

And now what?

The end of this paper. It's plenty long.

Almost. But in the bigger sense, what's next?

Collaborative work. I think that's a constant. Part of my work is to activate people. To coordinate them and bring them together. To whatever end, there's an organizer in me. I often tell people that I'm not an artist -- I just send emails.

More plays?

Maybe. There are a couple smaller projects that I have in mind that would play with classic texts. But I'm not really looking for a theater career.

Why not?

My passion isn't for theater -- it's for the things theater is really good at: collaboration, collective experience, narrative, spectacle. I think there are other ways of getting to that.

Like?

Well, I've sort of put large scale sculpture and installation on hold over the past couple years. I think that I can go back into that. In particular, there's a project that I'm building with Todd Chandler in San Jose at the end of the summer. It's a drive-in movie theater built out of wrecked cars. You climb into an old car and watch a movie.

That's a pretty passive experience.

True. But an experience nonetheless.

OK. And?

I plan to continue to publish the Nonsense list as a community resource.

Big surprise.

I'd like to develop some objects that come out of the process of making collaborative projects. I've spent a decent amount of time trying to figure out how to document projects. I've come to the realization that it's impossible in many ways, and there's no substitution for actually being at a show or a performance. However, I suspect that objects might take on a life of their own. For

example, I made custom tickets for the 10 event. Afterward, I used leftover materials to create collages that were somehow connected to the event without being novelty artifacts.

That's a new thing.

Yes. I'd also like to teach.

What would you teach?

Public art. Site-specific art. Collaborations. Writing for artists.

That's rather specific.

It's true.

It's probably more useful to take a macro view here. What's the big picture?

So I think I've found a set of rules for making art. Or if not rules, then certain principles that direct the way I work. I'm pretty sure that the work I make, going forward, will respond to a set of conditions -- either the conditions of a site, or the limitations of time, or the people available as collaborators or audience.

I expect to make work that others can experience -- as interactive art or something even more primary. Work that gets people dirty. That happens outside of traditional venues for art. Works that expect something from their viewers.

It will be work in response.

6. ENDNOTES

- ¹ Sherman, Tom. "Artists' Behavior in the First Decade." *Accounting for Culture*. Eds. Andrew, Caroline; Gattinger, Monica; Jeannotte, M. Sharon; Straw, Will. University of Ottawa Press, Ottawa, 2005. 86. Print.
- ² Duchamp, Marcel. "The Creative Act." *The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp*. Eds. M. Sanouillet, M. and Peterson, E. Thames and Hudson, London, 1975. 138-140. Print.
- ³ *The Beauty of Questions*. Dir. Leonard Feinstein. University of California Extension Center for Media and Independent Learning, 1997. VHS.
- ⁴ Salter, Chris. "The Question of Thresholds: Immersion, Absorption, and Dissolution in the Environments of Audio-Vision," conference paper presented at Sonic Acts XIII. Amsterdam, 25-28 Feb. 2010.
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- ⁷ Rothenberg, Susan. "Gordon Matta Clark Remembrance by Susan Rothenberg." *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*. Stiles, Kristine and Selz, Peter. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996. 558. Print.
- ⁸ Hanley, William. "Gordon Matta-Clark at the Whitney." Artinfo.com. 11 April 2007. Web. Date Last Accessed, 04/01/2010.
- ⁹ Bey, Hakim. *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism*. Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 1985, 1991, 2003. Print. 100.
- ¹⁰ Direct inspiration is noted in a Cacophony Society newsletter billing the first burn in the desert in 1990 "Zone Trip #4: A Bad Day at Black Rock." Harvey, Larry. "La Vie Bohème -- A History of Burning Man." The Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. 24 Feb. 2000. Lecture.
- ¹¹ The authors of *We Are Everywhere: The Irresistible Rise Of Global Anticapitalism* chart a line of global protest that connects Reclaim the Streets to the WTO across the entire anthology.
- ¹² Kaprow, Allan. *Assemblage, Environments & Happenings*. New York: H.N. Abrams, 1966. 210. Print.
- ¹³ Kirby, Michael. *Happenings and Other Acts*. Ed. Sandford, Mariellen. London: Routledge, 1995. 25. Print.
- ¹⁴ Kaprow, Allan. "Tail Wagging Dog." *The Act: A Journal of Performance Art, Activities, Happenings, Events, Choices* 1986: 32. Print.
- ¹⁵ Kaprow, Allan, and McCarthy, Paul. "Allan Kaprow and Paul McCarthy." Museum of Contemporary Art. 27 March 2008. MP3 file. 1 April 2010.
- ¹⁶ Dewey, John. *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953*. Boydston, Jo Ann. Volume 10: 1934, Art as Experience. Southern Illinois University Press, 1987, 2008. 42. Print.

¹⁷ Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics*. Presses du réel, 2002. 45-46. Print.

¹⁸ *ibid.* 3.

¹⁹ Desantis, Alicia. "At the Guggenheim, the Art Walked Beside You, Asking Questions." *New York Times* 12 March 2010. Web. Date Last Accessed, 04/01/2010.

²⁰ Svetlichnaja, Julia. "Relational Paradise as a Delusional Democracy: A Critical Response to a Temporary Contemporary Relational Aesthetics," conference paper presented at BISA Conference. University of St. Andrews, St. Andrews, Scotland, 19-21 Dec. 2005.

²¹ It's true, as of April 2010, although there's a reference to *Conversation Pieces* in the "Public Art" entry.

²² Kester, Grant. *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*. University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2004. 10. Print.

²³ *ibid.* 53.

²⁴ Cotter, Holland. "A Broken City. A Tree. Evening." *New York Times* 2 Dec. 2007. Web. Date Last Accessed, 04/01/2010.

²⁵ The Creative Time website documentation of the project is solid, and Chan's artist statement is particularly straight-spoken and eloquent. *Paul Chan's Waiting for Godot in New Orleans*. Creative Time. Web. Date Last Accessed, 04/01/2010.

²⁶ A short statement in an email header announcing parties in 2009. Secret Project Robot. "A Weekend of Plenty." Message to the author. 8 Oct. 2009.

²⁷ *Relational Aesthetics*. 13.

²⁸ Beuys, Joseph. *What Is Art?: Conversation with Joseph Beuys*. Clearview, 2004, 2007. 9. Print.

²⁹ Mostly Emma Goldman's autobiography *Living My Life* and her essay "Marriage and Love" and Horton's conversation with Paulo Freire *We Make the Road by Walking*.

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