

Radical Space for Art in a Time of Forced Privatization and Market Dominance

»Denaturalizing dominant relations is the first step toward imagining the possibility of transformation.«

– Margaret Kohn, *Radical Space: Building the House of the People*

When funding for the arts is taken away or reduced so severely that it alters the cultural and economic landscape hurting many people by limiting their ability to make and present art how they want, there are two choices of action to take to counter this situation. The first is to start a grass roots effort to identify the ideological shifts in funding and to fight for political change. This could take many years, a lot of energy, and won't necessarily guarantee funding for the kinds of art you want to make and support right away. The power structures that have made it possible to defund the arts are not isolated. They are part of a larger social and ideological program. The other option you have is to build something that is independent of the abusive power that has caused the funding to diminish. This can start immediately, without any waste of time.

It isn't enough to say you run an »alternative« or »off« space if you just repeat the dominant modes of the production and presentation of art. This is the first big mistake most make when starting a space. It is also why you should not be surprised that funding is taken away if all you create is a not-very-commercial version of a commercial art space. Making this kind of space – be it a ruinous postindustrial loft or an *off-space-white-cube* – is a

1 › An essential text on the historic ideological thrust of the white cube is Brian O'Doherty's *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, First published in 1976. A reprint is available from the University of California Press, 2000.

2 › If you think this is simply rhetorical, and have any doubts about the general sleaziness of the commercial art world, spend a few days in the Chelsea art district in New York. Don't go to the galleries, you will be bored out of your mind, but hang out in nearby eateries and wait for the inevitable gaggle of curators and gallerists to start gossiping business. You won't hear discussions about ideas and aesthetics, but rather the horrific slime of their milieu gushing from their smug self-importance. You will hear them make fun of their artists, who are oblivious to such practices as »flipping paintings« for more money, and of »stupid collectors« who pay for expensive paintings, but are shipped the wrong ones, while the original purchases are sent to more savvy, and important collectors.

86

contradiction that most accept without much consideration. It is a kind of space that is not neutral, but has developed along a specific historical trajectory.¹ The white cube is as equally tied to elitist class articulations of culture as to capitalist modes of exchange that reduce all creativity to an equal flow of emptied value.² These kinds of spaces house artwork and social interactions that look and feel exactly like those in a commercial gallery. This is incredibly boring and also hurts the independence of the space as it just reiterates class and capital, but in weird hollow echoes. The class elitism and capitalist social forms are, in the end, forces that make the defunding of critical and marginal art practices possible. If you want more state support, then maybe you should start an opera or a symphony hall, the hallmarks of entrenched power and state subsidy of the status quo. But, if you truly want to engender a different way of thinking and acting, the space or place for art you build must do things differently. It is this simple. You can make art spaces and practices that directly embody the changes you want to see in the larger culture in which they are lodged. It takes no theoretical framework to get started. Nor does it take government or corporate funding. You do not even need a permanent, fixed space.

One objection that gets raised is that this is what neoliberal governments want us to do in the first place: to reduce taxes, government spending, and support the privatization of everything. We should be building spaces regardless of whether there is a hostile or sympathetic elected government. Building a space that is fundamentally different from the dominant culture and how it orders life couldn't be further from the logic of privatization. This immediately takes us out of the neoliberal equation and away from creating »entrepreneurial models« of art practice, in the sense that they counter, by their very existence, the logic of such systems and entities. If we were just building private commercial models, then yes, we would be doing exactly what they want. But if we can create new kinds of public and social space that by the way they define themselves embody resistance, then we are already undermining the dominant authority. Resistance is first spatial. It takes place in specific locations under localized conditions by people with opinions and political sensibilities, desires, and the will to make things happen. The existence of radical space already is resistance, and it is beautiful.

We need more radical spaces. This doesn't mean that they have to have a radical political agenda that is easy to identify, and which will create a different kind of marginalization or elitism.³ Making radical space is about developing spaces that denaturalize the norms of the dominant culture and provide for

new ways to build community, social relations, and the production of art. This implies the development of forms of art that don't repeat the logic of the market or even bureaucratized democracy. We have accepted too many limits on our creativity already!

There are a handful of interesting, innovative, independent, and autonomous spaces for art in the United States that do this. They have developed in a time of forced privatization and very little to no funding for the arts. People have been forced to find creative ways to make space for art and build audiences for their ideas. Not only do they create new spaces, but they do so in a way that makes them distinct from the dominant culture. This is a critical part of their existence. This essay gives a brief history of the recent defunding of experimental art on the national level and profiles several organizations that have come about after this intense forced privatization.

BACKGROUND

Today, if you want to have an art practice or create a space for art that is not beholden to the market or commercially driven forms of production and reception, you have to build it yourself. This was not always the situation in the U.S. There were two major times when federal funding for the arts was seen as an essential part of a healthy economy and robust democracy. These periods were in the 1930s, and from the late 1970s to the early 1980s.

In this latter period, the federal government provided, through the National Endowment for the Arts, enough money to sustain a national network of independent art venues called »alternative spaces.« It was one of the most progressive federally funded art programs in the history of the U.S. Not only were these spaces important for creating non-commercial forms of art, they also were often the only places where women, people of color, and lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered people could present their work. The art market (and its museum validation and storage units), until that time, had been primarily for white men. The alternative spaces fundamentally changed exhibition practices on all levels in the U.S. One of the most important consequences of the funding and climate was that you could choose to be a non-commercial artist and give yourself over to the exploration of ideas rather than the machinations of producing art for the market, the homes, and the investment portfolios of wealthy assholes. Progressive and radical art spaces can have an impact on the larger culture in ways that benefit many people. The alternative spaces network proved this.

The alternative spaces network was in part an extension of

3 › In the U.S., during the late 1980s and early 1990s, anarchist info shops and *Temporary Autonomous Zones (TAZ)* popped up all over the place. Many were inspired by Hakim Bey's essay »T.A.Z.: *The Temporary Autonomous Zone*,« first made available to the public in 1994, later published by Autonomedia in 2003. Despite the rhetoric of being for everyone, they tended to just reflect the aesthetics and politics of those who set them up. This is not the kind of radical space I am demanding as it only repeats certain modes of political activities and often insists on anarchist subjectivities. Rather, more open spaces are needed where there is a critical dismantling of the dominant culture, but coming from multiple perspectives and open dialog, not a different kind of fixed ideology.

87

4 › To my knowledge there haven't been any full assessments of what happened during this time. There is an important book, made shortly after the culture wars flared that collected letters, essays, speeches, and other sources from artists and politicians on both sides of the debate: *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts*, By Richard Bolton, New York: New Press, 1992.

the counter cultural movement of the late 1960s. This is one reason why the right wing government of *Ronald Reagan* and his Senate allies *Jesse Helms*, *Strom Thurmond*, and others, used controversial artwork of *Robert Mapplethorpe*, *David Wojnarowicz*, and others to wage a symbolic war.⁴ They launched a culture war to first dismantle the support of progressive and critical art, but their larger target was to take apart the welfare state. The art world and its funding were only a nominal target, but a good one for rallying people to defend »traditional values« against »degenerates«. At the same time, *Regan* and his allies started a wave of privatization that has had a long-term, disastrous effect. Not only did they dismantle the welfare state, in the name of letting people keep more of their own personal tax dollars, but they also worked hard and laid the ground work for the destructive privatization of wealth that is oriented toward neoliberalism. No longer is wealth distributed to many, to a large middle and working class, but is increasingly concentrated in the hands of a shrinking number of individuals. This has rotted the job infrastructure in the U.S., creating problems like the flight of jobs overseas and the appearance of the Rust Belt across formerly industrial cities of the north of the country.

Federal funding should exist for the arts in the U.S. It need not be that large – hell, even one percent of the defense budget would spark a cultural renaissance in the U.S. There is no popular movement to secure this, nor are politicians willing to fight for it. There are numerous examples of »corporate welfare« that should be cut, which clearly doesn't adhere to the ideological rhetoric of free-marketeers, but rather entrenches the power and ideological positions of those who make it possible. Oil companies with record-breaking profits in 2006 are getting subsidies for oil exploration. Farmers are paid to keep their land fallow and not raise crops. The defense industry is funded for the production of weapons that not only should not exist, but also will never be used as they were designed for Cold War enemies and geopolitical realities of the past. The list goes on.

GET YOUR OWN CONTEXT

Below are two longer accounts of radical spaces for art and culture in the U.S. followed by shorter profiles of additional spaces. Each offers a unique approach to making space for art, culture, and other activities on their own terms. Their diversity is deeply encouraging as we can begin to glimpse what would be possible if even more people took up the challenge of making highly creative indigenous spaces that challenged the dominant ways of doing things.



The Experimental Station after the removal of the fire damaged parts of the building, Chicago, photo by Dan Peterman, 2001

THE EXPERIMENTAL STATION, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS (1995 – PRESENT)

Artist Dan Peterman purchased a severely run down warehouse on Chicago's south side in 1995. He turned it into one of the most interesting and highly successful places for the intersection of art, daily life, and civic participation in the US: The Experimental Station. In a time of little to no public support for the arts, Peterman established a model for sustaining a wide range of activities on a very low economy. He put the production and presentation of art in relation to larger concerns, creating a rich dialog that spilled over into multiple practices providing an expanded field for thinking how aesthetics could function in a neighborhood setting.

The building was the first to house the Resource Center, one of the country's oldest recycling centers. The Resource Center took a highly innovative approach to identifying and confronting multiple waste streams generated by corporations, government, and private citizens. They created free restaurants from perfectly good food that had been thrown away. They made free clothing stores and other initiatives sharing the excesses they were able to save from landfills. They even had a »library« of VW vans that were used to haul recycled and re-usable materials. One could check out a vehicle from this library and use it for various purposes related to the mission of the Resource Center. A recent initiative seeks to turn all vacant land in Chicago into a networked organic farm system that includes their flagship site City Farm.⁵

Peterman started visiting the Resource Center when he was a student, later securing space amidst piles and piles of reclaimed materials for a studio. The life of the Resource Center – its constant flow of people, energy, reclaimed materials, and the persistent rethinking of an inherited and broken system of consumption and production – and Peterman's own development as an artist serve as an important backdrop to the development of The Experimental Station.

The Experimental Station housed Peterman's studio, a bike shop – where kids could work both gaining skills and earning their own bikes – a wood shop, offices, the Baffler magazine, a mechanic, an artist residency program, flexible work and exhibitions spaces, and a host of organizations active in the area. Community gardens surrounded the building. They were used for producing organic vegetables and as additional gathering and project spaces.

A mysterious fire destroyed the Experimental Station in 2001. Several of us feel that it was arson done on behalf of private developers and corrupt city officials. Ensuing activities, in-

cluding campaigns of misinformation, intimidation, and obstruction, immediately followed the fire. To this day, no one knows exactly what happened.⁶

The Experimental Station has been forced to redefine itself because of the fire. It can no longer operate with a low level economy. And it hasn't yet become fully functional as a public gathering place. They are figuring out how to adjust to a new reality and set of challenges.⁷ I will focus on how The Experimental Station was operating prior to the fire.

The Experimental Station has been called a multi-use center, a place where multiple kinds of practices overlap. In his article »Until It's Gone: Taking Stock of Chicago's Multi-Use Centers«, agitator-curator Nato Thompson writes:

I use the term »multi-use center« to describe the activities of these idiosyncratic exhibition spaces. It's a working term and possibly used to compensate for a rather dysfunctional methodology. Moving from bicycle repair to collective kitchen to conceptual art isn't always the smoothest of journeys. But if one can get past the white cube stigmas, the physical proximity and conceptual disparity of the various enterprises create a veritable social catalyst.⁸

It is through new kinds of interactions between things normally not meant to interact that the multi-use center draws its strengths and distinguishes itself from other kinds of places for art. Art does become a »social catalyst« or a way to think and do things differently. Hybrids are easily formed; if useful they are kept, if not, discarded.

Thompson's essay was prescient in that it described something happening among a handful of independent innovative initiatives, while simultaneously being mirrored on the institutional level.⁹ Because of reduced federal funding for museums, many were forced to make shifts towards a kind of »multi-use« as well. But this is markedly different than the kind of multi-use typified by The Experimental Station as it completely lacks the cross fertilization of ideas and practice. In museums, it might simply mean renting your galleries out for weddings, private parties and corporate events. Another unfortunate thing was happening as well, and that is the increased reliance on corporate funding – image whitewashing used to put friendly faces on companies known for dirty business practices.

The Experimental Station functioned in a very simple way. It relied on one or two tenants paying rent at a near-market rate. The rent from these tenants would provide for the basic costs of running the building. This allowed for others to have offices and work spaces for either very low rents, or for »sweat equity«, which can come in the form of cleaning the building, cooking

5 › The Resource Center's founder Ken Dunn's account of the City Farm and some of the key ideas that have driven the organization since its inception can be found in *Belltown Paradise / Making Their Own Plans*, Edited by Brett Bloom and Ava Bromberg, Chicago: Whitewalls, 2005.

6 › An in depth account of the fire is available in *Downtime at the Experimental Station: A conversation with Dan Peterman*, By Dan S. Wang, Chicago: Temporary Services, 2004. Available for download: www.temporaryservices.org/downtime.pdf

7 › With the fire came a great deal of scrutiny and interference from the City of Chicago. City officials made it very difficult to get the proper permits at every stage, from tearing down the fire damaged remains to laying a new foundation and rebuilding. Where the old structure had been completely ignored in relation to zoning and code laws, the new building was under constant surveillance for the slightest infraction. Thus, many things that would not have been brought up to code in the past now had to be paid for. The price of rebuilding was more than ten times of what Peterman had paid for the building. A different economic model now has to be in place to cope with this changed reality.

8 › »Until It's Gone: Taking Stock of Chicago's Multi-Use Centers«, By Nato Thompson, *New Art Examiner*, March-April Issue, 2002, pp. 49–55.

9 › The shift in the funding climate also forced the historical alternative spaces to change in similar ways. Many were unable to make the shift and disappeared. Those that did survive had to institutionalize in ways that fundamentally changed their way of functioning and the kind of risk taking in art they supported. They also began to take more corporate funding or even aligned themselves directly with museums. This is the case with the most high-profile, former alternative space, like P.S.1 in Queens, which is now an arm of the Museum of Modern Art.

meals, or miscellaneous work, helping to keep the costs low while contributing to a cooperative, engaged atmosphere.

Not any business was welcome to set up shop at the building. Care was taken in choosing activities that complemented other activities of the building. Personalities and practices were fit together in order to almost craft a situation that would create unknown surpluses out of the interactions of people inhabiting and using the building.

Combining informal and formal economic practices encouraged a kind of participation and collaboration that made for a highly dynamic situation. It certainly showed that it was possible to effectively run an art space that was neither dependent on government funding nor on corporate patrons. Peterman would always hesitate when asked if this was really his practice – and that all the gallery art somehow was secondary in making the building function. Being there you knew it was, or at least it was something special you weren't going to get in museums, traditional artist-run spaces, or any other typical place where one encounters art. There was a really exploded notion of how art and highly refined aesthetic sensibility could contribute to a larger, more interesting, constantly unfolding daily situation.

MESS HALL, ROGERS PARK, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS (2003 – PRESENT)

Mess Hall is housed in a storefront in the Rogers Park neighborhood on Chicago's far north side. It is run by a loose group of 11 people that refer to themselves as keyholders; I am one. Mess Hall is a place where we can unplug our visual work and that of others from both the ways in which the market determines art spaces as well as traditional forms of »alternative« space-making. Some of us call Mess Hall an experimental cultural center, as a way to distinguish it from these kinds of traditional art spaces. It began as a short-term experiment, but is now approaching its fourth anniversary.

Mess Hall is deeply inspired by the ecological activities and multi-use organizational structures of The Experimental Station and the Resource Center. However, Mess Hall extends some of the thinking and activities of these two organizations in more experimental and open ways because of a unique economic position: Mess Hall has little overhead as the space is provided for free by the landlord. This frees up what can be done there. It takes the emphasis off of having enough money for programming and keeping the doors open, and thus allows for energy to be put in directions that don't need to replicate market-based social interaction.

Mess Hall denaturalizes capitalist social space by insisting on sharing rather than making a profit from others or treating them as culture consumers. It takes away the »normalcy« of money-based interactions that typify almost every other exchange we have with others outside. Many kinds of people circulate through the space, not just arts professionals, because of the kinds of programming one finds there. There have been skill-sharing workshops that reuse consumer waste, teach various food preparation skills, demonstrate different methods of screen-printing, and more. There are exhibitions, talks, performances, and other kinds of programming.

Mess Hall isn't a traditional white cube by design. Those of us who started Mess Hall wanted it to be a place where art could be put in relation to creative urban planning, radical city ecology, food democracy, labor issues, and other things that either informed us in our artistic practices or that we participated in independently. At any given moment at Mess Hall, there might be an exhibition in one part of the space, while another section holds furniture made of recycled material, and the entire place is used for gatherings to share knowledge, hold discussions, reclaim forgotten or suppressed social and art histories, and more.



Public event in front of Mess Hall by Biggest Fags Ever, photo by Brett Bloom, 2003.

No money changes hands in Mess Hall as there is no charge for events, food, drinks; the selling of things is discouraged. Mess Hall insists on other kinds of exchange between people and tries to get users of the space to not relate to one another in terms of capitalist exchange. It is also part of a larger attempt to build a generosity economy. Mess Hall operates a generosity economy from the combined surpluses of those who use Mess Hall. An economy of generosity is distinct from a »gift economy«. The latter still relies on exchanges of material items where people solicit obligations from one another, which does little to improve on the kinds of exchange money elicits. It puts too much emphasis on material items rather than open social experience. A »generosity economy« posits a climate of generosity that isn't attached to objects or material goods, but a social nexus. The generosity of the landlord, by giving us the space for free, created a surplus – an empty storefront that we could fill with our ideas and activities – a surplus to our own lives and economies that we could easily turn around and share with others. This was the foundation for our thinking about and building up this generosity economy. Mess Hall keyholders and users are asked to bring surpluses from their lives – extra clothes, food, time, ideas, knowledge, willingness to share and



Continental Drift series at 16 Beaver, New York, photo by Daniel Tucker, 2006.

create together, and so on – and put them in direct relation to each other. This sparks exponential growth of generosity and even accommodates those who won't ever be generous towards others, no matter what the incentive or climate.

SHORT PROFILES:

Not all these spaces would fit comfortably under the designation of »radical space«, however, they deviate from the norms significantly enough to warrant their inclusion and consideration here; each presents its own unique way of dealing with the current climate of diminished public space, dialogue, and funding.

16 BEAVER GROUP, NEW YORK, WWW.16BEAVERGROUP.ORG, (1999 – PRESENT)

Located in New York's financial center, just a short walk from a fortified Wall Street (massive barriers are still embedded in the streets to prevent attacks from planes?), is 16 Beaver St, the address from which comes the name for a loose-knit group that has created one of the most important spaces in the U.S. The



Interior view of first floor of the Brady Street Pharmacy, photo by Brett Bloom, 2006.

space is run by several artists and is a platform for regular gatherings. It houses discussions around current art, cultural production, and political activities. One of their most ambitious programs called *Continental Drift* – that captures the spirit of the place and people – was initiated by critic and theorist Brian Holmes. It sought a collective process of »mapping the operating systems of Empire, but above all intended to open up the few square meters of 16 Beaver to individual or group testimonies, artistic visions, and intellectual debates able to articulate, put into words, but also knit together, and weave into unforeseen combinations a number of singular cracks appearing in the worlds of power.«

THE BRADY STREET PHARMACY, MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN

If you walked into The Brady Street Pharmacy, you would not immediately think of this as a radical art or culture space. But, you would also not see something that is all that familiar, or more accurately, you would see familiar things, but put into a new, strange relationship to one another that you haven't seen before. Once inside the front door, you are right in the middle of a functioning, fully stocked pharmacy, immediately to your



Looking out from one of the massive open-air workspaces at The Steel, photo by Brett Bloom, 2005.

left is a diner, and to your right is a theater. There are none of the walls, hallways, doors or other typical manners of demarcating space separating these activities that one would expect. Everything is open and in relatively the same space. Interspersed throughout are old projectors, lighting equipment and other odds and ends of theater gadgetry. The pharmacy and the diner are the economic anchors for the arts activities that happen there. There is the theater on the ground level, with a movie theater, dance performance and rehearsal space on the top floor. Pharmacist and founder, *Jim Searles*, literally fills prescriptions by day and produces plays in the evenings. He is an outspoken proponent of independent theater and filmmaking [BL1].

CENTER FOR LAND USE INTERPRETATION (CLUI), CULVER CITY, CALIFORNIA, WWW.CLUI.ORG, (1994 – PRESENT)

CLUI maintains its headquarters in Culver City in a small old storefront. There you will find exhibitions, a large library, a shop, and members of the group busily working on a myriad of projects. CLUI maintains an enormous physical »Land Use Database« with a limited number of entries available online. CLUI organizes exhibitions for other venues, sponsors projects by artists, and has several remote locations in the Utah desert, upstate New York, and elsewhere. Their ambitious *American Land Museum* is »a network of landscape exhibition sites« where »[the] primary 'exhibit' at each location is, naturally, the immediate landscape of the location.« The sites are found around the country located in specific regions of interest to CLUI. The organization cobbles together a very effective economy and extremely active programming schedule on a large scale by getting funds from a variety of government sources and private foundations, donations from individuals, and by the sale of publications.

OUTPOST FOR CONTEMPORARY ART, LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA, WWW.OUTPOST-ART.ORG, (2004 – PRESENT)

As a core principle, Outpost has defined itself as a flexible structure that inhabits different spaces and contexts for the presentation of contemporary art. A 2006 »projection bombing« campaign by the collaborative Think Again, called *The NAFTA Effect*, moved around LA projecting text in English and Spanish addressing »how international treaties like NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement], in concert with national anti-immigration efforts, reshape the ways families live and work on both sides of the border.« Recently, the organization acquired an



The NAFTA Effect, by Think Again, Los Angeles, photo by Michael Orenich, 2006.

office space that they hope to develop »into a meeting ground for local and international artists and audiences with a year-round residency program, a resource, event, and gathering space, and intermittent exhibition venue.« Outpost gets its funding from a variety of sources, both from funders and innovative fundraising activities, which often take the form of experimental exhibitions.

THE STEEL YARD, PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND, WWW.THESTEELYARD.ORG, (2001-PRESENT)

The Steel Yard is an incredibly dynamic place. It began to »serve as sponsor and catalyst for innovative approaches to urban revitalization, arts promotion, workforce development, and community growth.« It is housed in an old steel mill and supports a dizzying array of activities. Visit at any given time and you will see several small groups working on various projects – from psycho-geographic interruptions in the city spaces of Providence to workshops on how to weld steel – the energy they produce is intoxicating. The Steel Yard offers its own cogent model for making a sustainable, large-scale arts initiative. It draws together money and resources from both formal and informal sources. It gets educational grants, rents studio and work space, and even produces some of its own things for sale. As a multi-use venue, the Steelyard facilities include a foundry, ceramics studio, blacksmithing shop, and welding shop, a studio space, and an outdoor work and exhibition space. In addition, it offers educational programs for young people and has an experimental, mobile greenhouse.

[JM2]

This list could easily be expanded beyond what is provided above. And it need not be confined just to the U.S. There are interesting models of practice all over the world. Many exist in Germany. It is because of a space in Hamburg, the Room for Northeast Reading, that this essay exists in the first place. My collaborator Bonnie Fortune and I work together periodically under the framework Let's Remake. We were invited to Hamburg by projektgruppe and asked to give a presentation at the Room for Northeast Reading about our activities. Projektgruppe asked me to contribute to the symposium documented by this book. I would like to thank them for the invitation and for giving feedback on this text. Thanks go also to the organizers of the symposium.