

# UNTIL IT'S GONE:

## TAKING STOCK OF CHICAGO'S MULTI-USE CENTERS

by Nato Thompson

In the early hours of April 25, 2001, a three-alarm fire broke out at Chicago artist Dan Peterman's complex at 6100 South Blackstone Drive. Starting from the northeast corner in the Big Fish Furniture shop, the blaze spread across the roof and tore through the entire building. Firefighters arrived and blasted the complex with high-powered hoses, the sheer force of which put holes in the sheetrock walls and drenched a deteriorating stock of *The Baffler* magazines. The fire practically decimated the building. Ten years of Peterman's recycled works had turned to hardened blobs. *The Baffler*, one of the nation's greatest muckraking journals, lost most of their archives and their whole office. Blackstone Bicycle Works lost their store. By the end of the blaze, the city of Chicago was dramatically close to losing one of its most unique and utopic alternative art centers.

Approximately a week later, De Paul art professor and artist Jim Duignan received what amounted to an eviction notice. His project called the Stock Yard Institute was to have its rent raised from zero to \$2500 a month with a severe decrease in square footage. The Stock Yard Institute, located at 4741 South Damen Avenue, was just coming into its own as a particularly idiosyncratic and socially radical art center. Chicago artist collective Temporary Services had begun to move in. The South Side's

University of Hip Hop had just painted the walls with murals depicting elephants plowing through the streets of the downtown Loop. A roof garden was being developed and Duignan's high-school students were regularly meeting there. Duignan envisioned a space for artists whose practice incorporated everyday life. Now everyday life was sending him packing.

The confluence of these two tragedies had many Chicago artists, activists, teachers, and neighbors talking (and paranoid). What had been lost? How could this happen? It wasn't simply that these spaces provided noncommercial venues for art, but in a more beguiling manner, there was a sense that each space was endearingly odd. Not simply venues for noncommercial art, they were multi-use centers that strategically bridged disparate practices and communities. They were lacunae in a laundry list of predictability. Globally such polymorphous venues are on the rise, and under the noses of most Midwest residents, Chicago has been the leading city in the organic development of these models. A fire and an eviction hadn't simply caused a void, they had induced an urgent need for reflection. What is it these spaces were doing and how can we build on them? Looking at the broad scheme of alternative centers globally and concentrating on these two spaces locally, many possibilities reveal themselves.

PREVIOUS PAGE: View of *The Baffler* office at 6100 Blackstone Drive, 2001.

Photo by Andrew Gregg.

BELOW, LEFT AND RIGHT: Views of Dan Peterman's courtyard and office spaces after the fire.

Photos by Dan Peterman.



## INTRODUCING THE MULTI-USE CENTER

*One could easily imagine an artist working with a literary magazine or a carpentry shop working with a bike shop, but how would a bike shop and a literary magazine collaborate? Or a carpentry shop and a writer's studio? The answer is that they did, in many varied ways and on many levels.*

—Greg Lane, *The Baffler* publisher.

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. This multi-use sociability is the same catalyst that pushes the rhetoric of much contemporary art and Postmodernism.

Nicolas Bourriaud coined the term “relational aesthetics” to describe the art of the late '90s. Artists like Liam Gillick, Superflex, and Rirkrit Tiravanija produce context-specific work that allows the viewer many points of entry and is fundamentally contingent, existing between discourses. It is no wonder that terms like “generosity” and “relational” came into vogue as artworks became dialogues and not objects. But as cultural critic/political theorist Tom Frank and friends at *The Baffler* would happily point out, such approaches don't

move away from the constraints of capital, but tend to reflect it. The move in late capitalism from manufacturing to service has created information as the new commodity, in all its decentered forms. What is different about multi-use centers, and what allows them to break from these molds is that their production and site are linked within a process that evades, in spirit as well as economics, the logic of capital. For spaces like Peterman's studio building and the Stock Yard Institute, their art practice is embodied in the site itself and the day-to-day operation of the site is engaged in a radical dislocation from that capitalist sensibility.

On my first visit to Peterman's complex in 1999, I was quickly reminded that mixing art and life isn't always pretty. The term “organic” seemed a bit passive to describe the space, which was mazelike and chock full of contraptions. Peterman's recycled minimalist bricks were laying around, refried beans and tofu were being prepared in the central kitchen, *The Baffler* magazines were piled up everywhere, a motley assemblage of people of all ages were milling about, and ramshackle bicycles were hanging from the ceiling. Everyone seemed quite comfortable in the mayhem and I hoped, one day, I would as well. Various discourses and modes of living were mixing in every nook and cranny and I knew it was necessary to decenter my outlook.

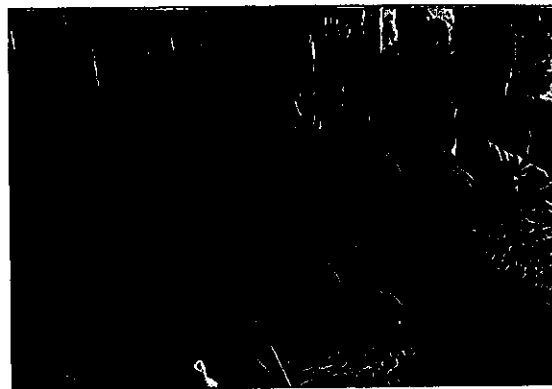
In 1996, Peterman bought the Blackstone building from the Resource Center (a do-it-yourself recycling center that is currently imperiled as well). Many

of the inhabitants, including Peterman, occupied the premises before this transition in ownership. *The Baffler*, Big Fish Furniture (which will become Big School Furniture), Peterman's studio, Monk Parakeet (a gallery), a beautiful community garden, and Blackstone Bicycle Works all operated out of the facility.

Blackstone Bicycle Works (BBW) grew out of the recycling center that previously operated at the site. As recycled bicycles began to collect on the premises, the feeling that something a little more productive should happen to them was hard to ignore. At least that is how founder Andy Gregg saw it. Now BBW is a nonprofit that gets local youth involved in small business practices, fixing bikes in exchange for bike parts.

Amongst the din of repair and reuse, one can hear the witticisms of *The Baffler*. As producers of a muckraking journal committed to reinvigorating the left, publisher Greg Lane and editor Tom Frank have found 6100 South Blackstone to be a most convivial operating center. Since 1988, they have become the bastion of true American essayists in the vein of H. L. Mencken and Studs Turkel. Their satiric voices tear into everything holy, from punk rock to long-haired dot-commers. Not impressed by a contemporary confluence of '60s counter-culture and '90s corporate culture, their perceptive criticism has shed light on the dark side of the information revolution. “Our society is blessed with a great profusion of self-proclaimed subversives, few of which have any problem with the terrifying economic-cultural order into

BELOW: Jim Duignan with youth at the Stock Yard Institute designing *Gang Proof Suit*.  
Video stills from a broadcast on Chicago's Channel 11, 2001.



which we are blithely stepping on the eve of their millennium," states the introduction on their Web site. Their important conviction that their culture industry is, in large part, the dubious outgrowth of late capitalism is a necessary ingredient in any critically informed cultural diet. For an art culture that has mostly reverted to commercial models for its sustenance, such lessons are sorely needed.

South Blackstone is home to a massive community garden growing tomatoes, corn, lettuce, and cilantro. Big Fish Furniture produces high-end furniture from their collective woodshop. Peterman utilized the facilities for his own art production. The Monk Parakeet gallery space housed exhibitions from guest curators as well as those involved in the residency program, which basically entails a free place to live and work at the complex and may be one of the best kept secrets in Chicago. In its recent history, it has hosted a stunning array of international artists and become known as a sort of global crash pad. A quick survey of the artists who have worked out of the space includes Tiravanija, Christian Wittenberg, Huber Duprat, PTTR (paint the town red) with Hans Winker and Stephan Michael, Slovenian collaborative NSK, Superflex, documentary film artist Gitte Villesen, French artist Nicolas Floch, Danish collective N55, and Swiss artist Christoph Buchel in collaboration with Thomas Blackman Associates.

The Stock Yard Institute (SYI) had neither the history nor the resources of 6100 South Blackstone. As amazingly

resourceful as is founder Jim Duignan, the unforeseen rent hike sent his project right out of the building located at 48th Street and Damen Avenue. SYI was to be home to a bunch of different groups all of whom approached the world in an integrated manner. San Miguel School, a privately funded alternative school that brought Duignan in to initiate an alternative arts/education program, operated out of the building next door. The University of Hip Hop, founded by Chicago graffiti artist and poet Lavie Raven, specializes in graffiti, rapping, break-dancing, and DJing. These four subjects are the cornerstones from which the University of Hip Hop engages everyday life. Recently, after some camping trips, many of the students at the University of Hip Hop began painting murals of wolves and elephants, some of which ended up all over the interior of SYI. Temporary Services (TS) had been looking to station an outpost at the site as well. Temporary Services, in my opinion the most influential and groundbreaking collective operating in Chicago, has been investigating social approaches to aesthetics for almost four years. TS member Nancy Klehm devoted long hours to providing a garden in which SYI students could work. And (full disclosure) The Department of Space and Land Reclamation, a group with which I am involved, was looking to instigate some projects there as well. Formerly an early-twentieth-century Ukrainian men's club, the building consisted of three floors with ample space. Duignan moved quickly to transform the center into what he saw as a

"reasonable, critical place for the pursuit of ideas, experimentation, and change."<sup>1</sup>

His work with kids in the most violent youth crime neighborhood, Back of the Yards in southwest Chicago, is an example of art production that is inherently "relational," but with more radical implications. Using pedagogical practice inspired by Brazilian Marxist educator Paulo Freire, Duignan sees education as a

## FOR SPACES LIKE THE STOCK YARD INSTITUTE, THEIR ART PRACTICE IS EMBODIED IN THE SITE ITSELF.

shared experience. Listening to his eighth- and ninth-grade students' concerns, and the students in turn listening to his, they are able collectively to create meaningful projects. *Designing a Gang Proof Suit*, a project initiated in spring 2000, came out of discussions regarding the kids' experiences in the neighborhood. In response, students designed gang-proof suits that would allow them to feel comfortable when strolling around. Standing four-foot-ten-inches-tall (the

# PRAY FOR THOSE WHO ARE LOST SOULS



Saba y ten entendido, tú el más pequeño de mis hijos, que yo soy la Siempre Virgen Santa María, Madre del Verdadero Dios por quien se vive; del Creador de todo lo que existe; Señor del cielo y de la tierra. Desee vivamente que se me erija aquí un templo para en él mostrar y dar todo mi amor, compasión, auxilio y defensa, pues yo soy vuestra piadosa madre, a ti, a todos vosotros juntos los moradores de esta tierra y a los demás amadores míos que me in voquen y en mi confien; oír allí sus lamentos y remediar todas sus miserias, penas y dolores.

PROTOTYPE #1

# THE DUSABLE LIFE HOUSE



THE HOME FOR THOSE IN LIEB GUTS AND NO ONE TO LOVE  
HEER THEM. A SPACE FOR THE TERMINALLY ILL WHO HAVE  
NO FAMILY NO FRIENDS - LET'S GET THIS TOGETHER.



OPPOSITE: Examples of artwork made by the students of the Stock Yard Institute.  
*Durable Life House*, 2001. Mixed media, two panels, 32" x 40" each.

## WITH CITIES LIKE NEW YORK, SAN FRANCISCO, AND LOS ANGELES ALL RUSHING TO EVICT THEIR CULTURAL PRODUCERS, IT IS A SHAME THAT THE MIDWEST FOLLOWS THEIR LEAD.

average height of a sixth grader) and equipped with fur-lined boots and bullet-proof shielding, the conceptualized suits physically embody the creative brilliance and pragmatic fears of the students. I am told a welder is working on bringing them into reality.

The *Designing a Gang Proof Suit* project truly embodies the praxis of multi-use centers. It is a result of a successful dialogue between disparate groups. And it is at this point that a remarkable piece of knowledge comes to bear: it is hard, if not impossible, to untangle the space from the practice. For both Peterman and Duignan, as well as for the groups who work out of their spaces, their practice necessitates a radical, hybrid space out of which to work. The cross-fertilizing, reflexive methodologies can be felt in the simple fact that they both privilege collective dinners as moments of connection between groups, thereby mixing everyday experiences with their artistic practices.

It is this praxis that, in fact, is at the root of groups and spaces discussed here. The combination of a collective transformation or becoming and resistance to capital are able to hurdle some of the great barriers that have faced much contemporary art. The hermetic qualities and insulated creative practices of these hybrid places are able to flourish in direct relationship to a safe, relevant, and practical terrain. The ebullient realm of urban geography, social ecology, mechanical engineering, journalism, biodiversity, sustainable living, and interior design are sewn together in a compelling aesthetic strategy. Unlike the

modus operandi of capital, the process is organic, nonhierarchical, and open-ended.

### STRATEGIES OF ENGAGEMENT

*These practices and many more different but related experiments are where I believe the possibilities for art lie. They are positioned in the territory between active political engagement and autonomous experimentation, in that enclosure that is now marked out for contemporary art.*

—Charles Esche, referencing 6100 S. Blackstone<sup>2</sup>

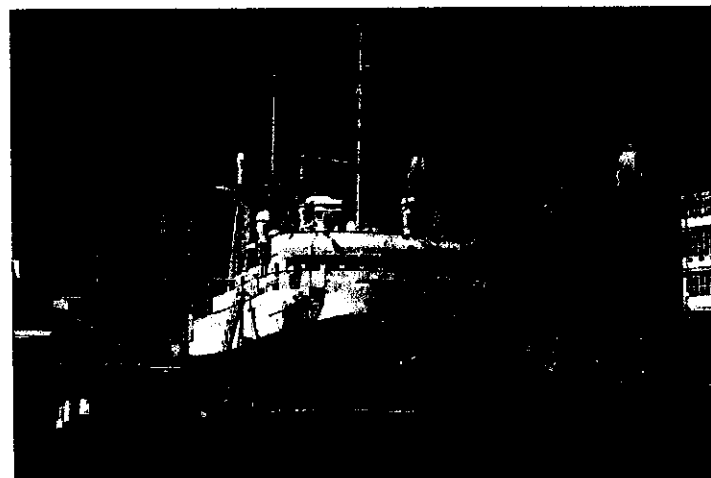
*In art institutions (museums, galleries, art schools, alternative spaces, etc.), the Habermas thesis, that Modernity never died, finds its practical application. In spite of all the critical fulminations about the death of originality, the artist, and the rest of the entities named on the tombstones in the Modernist cemetery, these notions persist, protected by an entrenched bureaucracy geared to resist rapid change.*

—Critical Art Ensemble (CAE),  
*Digital Resistance*, 2000<sup>3</sup>

EVERYTHING HAS CHANGED and nothing has changed. While we have ostensibly moved past heroicizing the individual artist toward a collective becoming, the art world has never looked more conservative and more focused on the individual. There is a great disparity out there between theory and art practice, and multi-use centers are

definite clues if not outright solutions to this vexing divide. In the graveyard of modernity (to follow up on CAE's macabre intonations), practice and site are intertwined in this new terrain where art is simply a strategy. While much of the art world is giddy with theoretical amnesia and Modernist gumption that cause people to think they invented what they are doing, there are offshoots of practice that reflect an engaged strategic approach. For example, pedagogical approaches influenced by Freire, such as Duignan's, are socially grounded. Many progressive education departments, and artists influenced by them, have taken advantage of an approach where the student/subject participates in his or her own development. This movement from a subject of study to a practice of becoming is the type of transition that the artists discussed in this essay are investigating.

In technology, some practitioners have coined the term "tactical media" to describe "a critical usage and theorization of media practices that draw on all forms of old and new, both lucid and sophisticated media, for achieving a variety of specific non-commercial goals and pushing all kinds of potentially subversive political issues."<sup>4</sup> Tactical media is interesting in that it preferences the mode of engagement over the subject matter, where the approach overrides the medium. There are many other fields, such as medicine, architecture, and anthropology, where the collapse of Modernism has developed more interdisciplinary offshoots. I mention these to provide a brief, and hopefully exciting,



ABOVE, TOP: Blackstone Bicycle Works  
before the fire at 8100 South Blackstone Drive.  
Photo by Dan Peterman.  
ABOVE, BOTTOM: MS Staholz, floating cultural institution.

sense of a new practice that is opening itself up.

As the practice of multi-use centers is more of a tenor than a full-fledged terrain, the differences between various examples might be more striking than their similarities. What is most important are these groups' hybridity and critical perspectives. Across Italy, a phenomenon known as the social center has become ubiquitous. There are now roughly 150 and the number is growing. These anarcho-communist multi-use centers house cooperative gardens, places for travelers to sleep, do-it-yourself concerts, and ad-hoc art exhibitions. They are somewhat shrouded in mystique, but they have been home to some of the more compelling and resistant strains of the global anarchist movement. Elsewhere in Europe, N55, a collective based in Denmark, have designed Buckminster Fuller-inspired housing, where they currently reside.

They produce a diverse range of utopian living devices including a floating platform that acts as a foundation for their home, clean-air machines, soil factories, and hydroponic units. Here in the States there is the Center for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI) in Los Angeles. CLUI conducts alternative tours and studies of Los

Angeles land-use issues. Investigating waste centers, dams, power supplies, complicated histories of film sets, and even land art, their projects tend to resemble geological research. But their approach is more beguiling than that of a university survey team. Equipped with field-study outposts, an extensive archive, tour buses, and a good sense of museological display, CLUI presents empirical knowledge in an alluring, if not ambiguous, manner. Their general appreciation for the problems of representation allows them to employ the tools of display cleverly in order to present a clearer picture of an extremely complicated landscape.

Sharing the same building with CLUI is the Museum of Jurassic Technology. Its founder David Wilson has been heralded for his museological, Postmodern plays on truth, but in fact, it is the strategic destabilization of discourse that makes this museum such a gem. Wilson's historical curiosities have paved the way for other spaces that live in a vertigo of allegiances and nonallegiances to established fields of study. In Rotterdam, an entire enclave by artist Joep van Lieshout has gained momentum. In his artist compound, he developed Atelier van Lieshout (AVL), an awkward and functional free state. With almost 30 co-workers, AVL produces compost, medicine, alcohol, weapons, residences, and furniture for polyamorous practices. It is a more libertarian blend of alternative public works and happenings (in the Allan Kaprow sense). Once again, the blurring of civic fields such as plumbing or furniture are enmeshed in strategies of alternative living.

Within the tactical media field there is a tremendous array of collectives: Critical Art Ensemble, Institute for Applied Autonomy (IAA), RIMark, HACTIVIST, and Sub-Rosa to name a few. Each of these groups uses technology to interact with, disrupt, and reconfigure traditional relationships to a given medium in order to expose underlying relationships of power. Their projects are strategically positioned to live in a nexus between various discourses and to examine them critically. For example, IAA has recently created a sort of Mapquest-like software at their Web site

<http://www.appliedautonomy.com> that conveniently maps out a journey from point A to point B in Manhattan with no surveillance cameras along the path, quite a trick. This software is available to the general public and isn't particularly geared toward the art world. It provides a strategic tool that complicates and reveals the dominant flow of power relations in an urban environment.

Multi-use centers are appearing everywhere. An inspiring example is the MS Stubnitz located in the harbor of Rostock, Germany. This 80-meter sailing vessel was purchased by a government cultural initiative to become a maritime cultural center that operates along the coast of the Baltic and North Seas exhibiting experimental art and music. Since its purchase in 1992, the MS Stubnitz has sailed to Stockholm, Hamburg, and Rotterdam entertaining audiences in its massive music venues and a dedicated 30-person crew. The crew lives in the cabins and the trawler is home to metal, carpentry, and electrical workshops, a print shop, a photolab, a graphic design studio, and an at-risk-youth program. Like 6100 South Blackstone, the boat provides youth social programming and production facilities.

## RED, RED TAPE

Strategically engaging the contemporary social terrain does not come without major complications. Myopic bureaucracies and scant public funding tend to reduce the social landscape to a visionless urbanity that runs on donated time. Unlike the more heavily funded artistic and social spheres of Western Europe, the United States has traditionally been reluctant to support open-ended strategies for social engagement. Just try to imagine the U.S. government paying for a Lake Michigan-based aircraft carrier that hosts raves and collectivist meetings. And still after the '70s "out of the galleries" movement, art venues by and large are synonymous with commercial galleries. For Peterman and Duignan, the city of Chicago has been a particularly arduous community in which to participate.

"I realized that the complex needed greater visibility," said Peterman. "Many

people in the city found it difficult to grasp what it is we are doing here. Centers like this, with organic models of organization, that are more open-ended with their goals, are complete mysteries to most people. They look at this place as an old shack with strange people hanging out." For Peterman, the constant pressure from various sectors that wanted to take the land from him was extremely draining. While it was bad enough to have his entire dream burn down, it was worse to have so many opportunists racing to court so soon afterwards to lay claim to the property. "If I lost this place, I doubt I would stay in Chicago," said Peterman. "I have put a lot of years into the complex. It anchors me here. Without it, I would probably join the global community."

For Duignan, born and raised in Chicago, the adversity is nothing new. "These kids live in some of the toughest areas in the country," he says. "I've been here my whole life. No matter what happens, I will keep working with them." His commitment, while admirable, need not justify such a difficult working environment. With little funding and no commercial support, these spaces rely on perseverance.

## REGIONALIST STRATEGIES: TAKING THE MIDWEST ALTERNATIVE

Fortunately, Peterman's complex is to be reborn as the Experimental Station. With insurance money paying for renovation, in a year's time 6100 South Blackstone will become home to the city's first alternative-living incubator. The name Experimental Station is borrowed from a speech Frank Lloyd Wright gave at Hull House, in which he expressed a desire for a place where art, technology, and design could interact. The Experimental Station will become a nonprofit as a method to gain more public support and will continue to house the organizations that have made it such a vital part of the Chicago community. Peterman intends to increase the residencies at the space for those creatively investigating the fields of ecology, cultural criticism, independent publishing, and alternative education.

Jim Duignan and the Stock Yard Institute have relocated to 836 North Leamington in the Austin neighborhood of Chicago. For many months, the future of SYI's physical locale was in doubt, but with the assistance of San Miguel School, Duignan was able to move his operation. In the interim, he never doubted that he would continue his work with students, but he did not relish the possibility of becoming nomadic. His situation is not unfamiliar. Many other spaces are perpetually on the move in a forced nomadism that is culturally and personally draining. Given this crisis in multi-use centers (as well as gentrification in general), the rush to embrace nomadism in contemporary discourse appears in bad taste.

With cities like New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles all rushing to evict their cultural producers, it is a shame that the Midwest follows their lead. Providing space for a regional breed of multi-use centers will not only further establish this compelling new sphere of practice, it will anchor an already vibrant cultural sphere. Seeing beyond the traditional exhibition space isn't just utopian, it is quite simply strategic and practical. ♦

*Nato Thompson is assistant curator at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art. He would like to thank Brett Bloom for his tremendous assistance on this article.*

<sup>1</sup> From Web site: <http://www.stockyardinstitute.org>

<sup>2</sup> Charles Esche, "Modest proposals for why the choice is limited to 'how the wealth is to be squandered,'" in *Berlin Biennale 2* (Berlin: Oktagon, 2001), 22-27.

<sup>3</sup> Critical Art Ensemble, *Digital Resistance* (New York: Autonomedia, 2000), 59.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.