

After Tilted Arc: Site Specificity in an age of Enterprise Culture

Gregory Sholette, 2007 *

In a late text entitled *Black as an Ideal*, Theodor Adorno outlined the severe conditions artists would have to meet in order to endure the historical despair and bogus affirmation of popular culture,

If works of art are to survive in the context of extremity and darkness, which is social reality, and if they are to avoid being sold as mere comfort, they have to assimilate themselves to reality. Radical art today is the same as dark art: its background color is black...On the verge of silence, the most advanced forms of art have sensed the force of this tendency.¹

Adorno insisted that such self-impooverished art must reject “the injustice of cheerful art,” and while it might still provide pleasure, it would do so by negating “the fraudulent sensuality of culture’s facade.”² As if in response, Richard Serra’s *Tilted Arc* appeared some fifteen years later, seemingly making concrete the austere strictures of Adorno’s black art.³ As if on queue, opponents of Serra’s work would describe his steel sculpture as a waste of taxpayer’s money, and as a rusty dark wall that blocked security sightlines of police and pedestrians. Some compared Serra’s work to the Berlin Wall. The rejection of *Tilted Arc* by office workers at the Federal Plaza in downtown Manhattan led to its eventual removal in 1989, the same year that the real wall separating East and West Germany was torn down. Meanwhile, the institution responsible for selecting *Tilted Arc* for the site, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), was itself being dismantled thanks in part to the conservative cultural agenda of the Regan administration, but also thanks to a growing recognition that high culture would have little propaganda value in the emerging Post-Cold War world. In an age of “trickle down” economics, why fund art when you can cut taxes for the wealthy? The era of public spending for culture, education, healthcare and numerous social welfare programs was ending. A new paradigm was taking shape.

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¹ T. W. Adorno, “Black as an Ideal,” *Aesthetic Theory* (German edition 1969), English translation, C. Lenhardt, (London: Routledge, 1984) p. 58, 59.

² Ibid. p. 59.

³ Serra began working on *Tilted Arc* in 1979 after receiving what was supposed to be a permanent commission for the sculpture from the General Services Administration, following a selection process supervised by the National Endowment for the Arts. The project was installed at Federal Plaza in 1981, but in 1989, after a contentious public hearing pitting some of the building’s workers against the art community, *Tilted Arc* was dismantled and trucked away as metal scrap. For an excellent account of the saga see: Clara Weyergraf-Serra and Martha Buskirk, Eds. *The Destruction of Tilted Arc: Documents* (Cambridge, MA.: The MIT Press, 1991) and the publication: *Public Art, Public Controversy: the Tilted Arc on Trial*, (New York: ACA Books, 1987.)

The new approach to arts funding would tap private support from the corporate business sector while instilling a competitive, entrepreneurial spirit not only within cultural institutions, but also among artistic producers as well. The *society of administration* that Adorno so despised, with its fraudulent optimism and banal populism, disappeared overnight, as if it had never existed. In its place emerged neoliberal enterprise culture; a highly deregulated economy characterized by entrepreneurial styles of business management, the private take-over of public spaces, and the rise of networked social production that allegedly makes up a “distributed labor force of unprecedented scale.”⁴ While the rise of enterprise culture undermined long-held notions of the commons and the public sphere, the dismantling of *Tilted Arc* also signaled a sea-change in the orientation of funding for public art. Abstract critique was replaced by works of art that stressed service to particular communities, including “under-served populations.”⁵ Commenting on this transformation in 1996, I wrote that “For a society increasingly polarized by real economic differences, the task at hand is to disrupt the process whereby a socially accommodating public art, one that appears to resolve the contradictions of public space, simply replaces the limited, though often potent, interventions of post-minimalism.”⁶ Today, with the twentieth anniversary of *Tilted Arc*’s removal only about a year away, it is clear that Serra’s attempt at creating an “anti-environment,” in which the art work “takes its own place or makes its own situation, or divides or declares its own area,” has been eclipsed not by one, but by several different or even antagonistic tendencies.⁷

One approach to site-specific art embodies precisely the concerns that I and others have raised regarding the socially ameliorative use of public art.⁸ A perfect example of this approach is the work commissioned to replace Serra’s sculpture at the Jacob K. Javits Federal Plaza: a swirling pattern of cheerful, lime-colored park benches surrounding soft islands of lush foliage.⁹ However, the other approach to contemporary public art carries forward a definite concern with social dissension. At their best, they avoid the instrumentalization of specific sites, aspiring neither to the bromides of “cheerful art” nor to the desire for an imaginary community ideal. Instead, such work seeks to produce a calculated

⁴ Chris Anderson, “People Power People Power: Blogs, user reviews, photo-sharing – the peer production era has arrived,” *WIRED* 14 July 2006.

⁵ From the 1996 Visual Arts guidelines of the [National Endowment for the Arts](#).

⁶ Quoted from my paper “Critical Transformations in the Concept of Site-Specificity: From *Tilted Arc* to REPOhistory,” first delivered at the [Whitney Museum of American Art](#) as part of the [Whitney Independent Studies Program](#), May 1996.

⁷ Richard Serra quoted in the catalog, [Richard Serra: Recent Sculpture in Europe 1977–1985](#) (Bochum, Germany: Bochum Galerie, 1985.)

⁸ In different texts throughout the late 1990s, James Meyer, Hal Foster, Rosalyn Deutsche, Miwon Kwon, and Grant Kester have all raised similar concerns about the affirmative functionality of certain modes of public art.

⁹ The new plaza was designed by [Martha Schwartz Partners](#), an architectural design firm whose mission was to “create a useable, lively open space in the heart of the city,” see the company’s webpage at: <http://www.marthaschwartz.com/prjts/civic/javits/javits.html>

interruption of everyday experience, and the de-familiarization of life's frayed habits. Employing odd shifts of scale, unexpected conversations, public masquerade, the giving of gifts, and the use of transient textual, graphic, or architectural installations, this other approach to publicly situated art ranges from mapping local geographies, a tactic the *Situationists* described as drift (*derive*), to amplifying social or political content that would otherwise remain muted within a particular urban setting.

Several of these tactics were incorporated into *Jamaica Flux: Workspaces & Windows 2007*, a series of publicly-sited art projects organized by Heng-Gil Han, Project Director for the Jamaica Art Center in Queens, New York, and his curatorial team consisting of Kóan-Jeff Baysa, Juliana Driever, Olu Oguibe, and Aniko Erdosi. Ranging from subtle encounters to startling interventions, these projects took place between September 29th and November 17th in one of the City's most established African-American neighborhoods. The artists involved in *Jamaica Flux: Workspaces & Windows 2007* made use of built structures, including select retail stories, restaurants, street corners, phone booths, and a bank, as well as natural ones including several trees in King Manor Park. Several projects in this park, the former estate of the lawyer Rufus King, an anti-slavery politician who signed the United States Constitution in 1787, were impossible to miss. One large tree became home to a splay of photosensitive purple fruit—the creations of artist Shigeeko Hirakawa—that dangled uncannily from its branches. Nearby, the artist Lishan Chang strung up a massive transparent wall made of paper-thin shrink-wrap tightly wound around several trees. On the day I saw the piece, it was being hammered by winds like an enormous drum. Nevertheless, much of the work in *Jamaica Flux* was more inconspicuous, and some seemed to want to disappear into the hectic bustle of Jamaica's street life. What especially interested me about the projects were those works that focused on issues of labor, economics, and the giving of gifts. Together these pieces reveal a thematic thread within the exhibition, which also happen to reveal key features of the structural transformation site specific art has undergone in the age of enterprise culture.

Mobile House for Urban Migrant Workers was a fictitious human way station camouflaged as an enormous tree stump. It was discreetly planted on a small, earthen plot outside a Citibank branch at 164th Street. Its author, Jenny Polak, is one of those exceptional mid-career artists whose work remains largely unseen within the mainstream art world. For years she has focused on the ubiquitous, yet equally invisible army of paperless laborers set in motion by global capital. For *Jamaica Flux*, she created a two-story, circular shack wrapped in a canvas skin printed with a purplish tree bark pattern. Inside the spurious stump were two floors. A ladder lead up to a sleeping loft, while underneath a broom and dustbin sat on the bare wood floor, inviting passing guests to feel at home, as well as to take responsibility for the upkeep of the house. A solar panel on the roof generated interior lighting. Over the course of the exhibition, various locals came to inhabit *Mobile House*, including a group of young boys from the block who adopted the space by parking their bicycles inside. One day, they used the space to hold a friend's birthday. Another neighborhood resident apparently picked up on the project's political implications. He told the artist the fake tree stump reminded him of rebel tactics he witnessed in Kenya, in which guerrillas

secreted themselves inside actual trees. In the coming year Polak is planning to introduce more of her camouflaged shelters in cities where migrant workers pass through unnoticed.

Saya Woolfalk's performance project also addressed that which hides in plain sight. Originally entitled *The Cleaners*, it was conceived in São Paulo, Brazil, and first performed at the New York Scope Art Fair in 2006. For that occasion the artist used recycled industrial materials to outfit a team of "brown skinned alien cleaning ladies." For eight hours, Woolfalk's "aliens" sought to disrupt the event by cleaning floors and shooting their ray guns at the "art patrons who had left their servants at home to engage in the four day long consumptive art fest."¹⁰ For *Jamaica Flux*, Woolfalk transformed her alien character into *Utopian Vendor*, a velvety-black creature with a round head and toothy grin who sells tourist trinkets from a cart packed with t-shirts, tote-bags, coffee mugs, and other souvenirs. Across the boulevard a group of six transparent figures flanked the entrance to the North Fork Bank like sagacious witnesses, or perhaps mere shoppers.

Artist Stephanie Dinkins photographed random individuals along Jamaica Avenue and then mounted these images, which resembled stained glass icons, in the windows of a modern temple to finance. *Oneonefullbasket* seemed to point out the inextricable bond between private identities and that ubiquitous medium of consumption called money. Departing from Dinkins' reflection on commerce and life, and instead actually intervening within the cycle of production and consumption itself, the artists Anna Stein and Athena Robles created an actual small-scale alternative economy on the streets of Jamaica. In exchange for having one's photographic portrait taken the artists offered each sitter five "Jamaican Dollars," photo-copies of hand drawn notes. This local currency could then be spent on food or goods at participating businesses along Jamaica Avenue. Over the past few years similar local currencies, or community dollars have been established in cities from Ithaca, NY to Hong Kong. The concept is quite simple. Unique monetary units of various denominations are used to pay for services and commodities, but only within a specific municipality. Excluded from the system are those multi-state or global businesses that move capital out of a city, such as chain stores or commercial banks.

Still another artwork that involved alternative modes of exchange was Diane Meyer's *Jamecos Trading Post*. The artist first observed that what is today known as Jamaica Avenue was once a major trading route for colonial farmers, and before that for the area's indigenous tribes.¹¹ Inside King Manor Park, she constructed a tiny, shelf-lined shack filled with coffee pots, jigsaw puzzles, beaded necklaces, throw pillows, snapshots, and what looked like a fake Winchester rifle. On given days Meyer stood behind a counter inside the trading post. If someone happened to enter, they were offered a chance to swap

¹⁰ All quotes are from emails sent to author by the artist on Sunday, 11 Nov 2007.

¹¹ The place-name Jamaica shares no etymological connection to the Caribbean Island, but instead derives from the word *Jameco*, which means "beaver" in Algonquian. The fact that many Jamaican immigrants have settled in the Queens neighborhood is simply a coincidence.

anything they possessed for an item of interest on display within the shack. By invoking a history no longer visible, as well as a form of non-monetary exchange that, while still quite common, remains marginalized by the mainstream economy, *Jamecos Trading Post* moved in and out of synchronization with its specific surroundings like a temporary wrinkle in space and time.

Rather than exchanging goods with locals, Gabriela Galván asked residents to give her things from their everyday life for her project *Regarding the Diaspora*. A Mexican national, Galván first circulated a letter within the neighborhood requesting locals drop off utilitarian objects, clothes, decorations, tools, games at the nearby First Presbyterian church. On Saturdays, the artist arrived with her sewing machine. She set herself up under a canopy on 164th Street and gradually stitched together what was given to her into a large, “three dimensional mural.” The mammoth work of public art that resulted from these recycled “gifts” was later affixed to an outside wall of the church. Not far away a group of artists parked a small, moving trailer they had converted into a street-side art gallery. Entitled the RIDER Project, the curb-side alternative space hosted a series of changing art exhibitions, some involving peculiar optical instruments, that drew a stream of people inside who otherwise would have been distracted by their daily commutes or the routines of shopping. Like a number of Jamaica Flux projects that were situated along sidewalks, bus shelters (Shelly Bahl), or phone booths (Lisa C. Soto), the work of the RIDER group sought to move art into the everyday. Meanwhile, the work of Polak, Woolfalk, Dinkins, Meyer, Galván, Stein and Robles typify an increasing number of contemporary artists who focus their attention on less than visible systems of social production and reproduction.¹²

In many respects the underlying issue of this new public work is human labor, a theme most artists have not seriously dealt with since the 1920s and 1930s. It is not all that surprising however, that a focus on production returns today, if admittedly in a very different form than that of social realism. Since the emergence of enterprise culture, the space of imagination and the realm of necessity have been increasingly superimposed onto each other. Even the irascible figure of the artist, whose criticism of centralized power and demand for autonomy was once the bane of capitalist management, has now come to represent the very essence of the post-industrial work force that calls upon everyone to be “creative,” and to “think outside the box.”

Needless to say, the informal and frequently playful approach taken by much contemporary interventionist art is quite unlike the unyielding defiance that Serra’s *Tilted Arc* revealed towards the public sphere. It also stands opposite Adorno’s bleak concept of black art, in so far as his Hegelian-

¹² For more on this tendency see my essay about the work of artist Oliver Ressler entitled, “Questions from an Artist Who Speaks (and Reads, Writes, Thinks, and Acts),” in his catalog *Alternative Economies, Alternative Societies*, Institute of Art/Wyspa Progress Foundation Gdansk, 2007. Also see “Alternative Economies: A roundtable discussion on art, money, and inventiveness,” that I moderated for the *Vera List Center for Art and Politics*, and excerpted in *Art on Paper* magazine, July/August, 2007, <http://www.artonpaper.com/bi/v11n06/feature-alternative-economies.php>

derived logic insisted that “essence must appear,” but did so after Auschwitz, Buchenwald, and Nanking exposed what the true spirit of our age consists of.¹³ Such horrors have not come to an end. The legalization of torture as a technique of interrogation by the United States government is proof enough that social reality remains “one of extremity and darkness.” If anything, by normalizing such conditions, we may be on the verge of repeating the very darkest passages that haunt Adorno’s thinking. Which is why we must take special heed when he states in the text “Commitment,” a stinging critique of politically engaged art, that, “It is not the office of art to spotlight alternatives, but to resist by its form alone the course of the world, which permanently puts a pistol to men’s heads.”¹⁴ Adorno’s words are especially convincing today as global marketing penetrates all forms of opposition, transforming resistance itself into what Thomas Frank labels a counter-cultural capitalist orthodoxy.¹⁵ At the forefront of this precarious landscape is the contemporary artist who is pulled hither and yon, always in danger of yielding to the vast machine that historian Julian Stallabrass mockingly dubs *Art Incorporated*.¹⁶ Nevertheless, we must finally reject the aesthetic conditions set by Adorno and his “black art.” Our refutation of the philosopher’s logic must be more than a wish to find him wrong, as if we secretly feared his muscular dialectic must come out on top sooner or later. Rather, we need to see clearly what Adorno’s aesthetic could not acknowledge, and what Serra’s mute formalism could not reveal. Our critique begins with the sober recognition that the conditions of cultural production in the past two decades or so have radically shifted from those of Cold War administered society. What neoliberalism has forced into view is a realm of previously unseen social production that has always taken place within the realm of the everyday and commonplace. It is what Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge describe as a [fix jump line here]previously concealed power that has throughout history “carried on its own production—within fantasy.”¹⁷

Collectivity, bathos, play, amateurism, sentiment, fantasy, gifting/swapping, even deep political resentments –all of this has been materializing under neoliberalism because its technologies and flexible modes of production are like a machine that must squeeze profits from every corner of social being. If this *other* realm of productivity has an artistic logic, then it is that of a lumpen or subaltern aesthetic as exemplified by zinesters, fantasy role-play gamers, knitting circles, garage-kit builders, devotees of Goth, Punk, and DIY street art, as well as the armies of cyber-geeks dedicated to the concept of open-source programming, and other forms of distributed knowledge. Furthermore, it generates heterodox methods of organizing and collectivization involving cooperative networks, non-market systems of gift exchange, and

¹³ Theodor W. Adorno, “Commitment,” translated by Francis McDonagh (1962), from *Aesthetics and Politics*, edited by Fredric Jameson, London & NY, Verso, 1980. p. 183.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 180.

¹⁵ Thomas Frank, “Why Johnny can’t dissent,” *Commodify your Dissent: Salvos from the Baffler* Eds. Thomas Frank and Matt Weiland (New York and London: W.W.Norton & Company, 1997) p. 34

¹⁶ *Art Incorporated* churns up “all material, bodies, cultures, and associations” in its search for profits, see Julian Stallabrass, *Art Incorporated: The Story of Contemporary Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). p. 16.

¹⁷ Miriam Hansen in the *Foreword* to Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge’s book *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.) p. xxxii.

forms of collective production that are inherently unsettling to the mainstream market and orthodox notions of aesthetic privilege. The inverted logic of this *other* productivity has not gone unnoticed. Certain artists have come to use any means necessary, at any given moment, at any specific site, in order to stage acts of resistance. These are artists who speak, and read, write, ask questions, and act. They plow directly into the sphere of informal production, engaging with information and experiences that are not proper to their station--worldly things which force them to become autodidacts regarding the social, political, and economic aspects of life. By refusing to remain in their proper places, these artists inevitably align themselves with this larger sphere of shadowy creativity that invisibly grounds the symbolic and material economy of the art world, like a missing mass or dark matter. That alliance was matter-of-factly present in the site-specific public installations of *Jamaica Flux 2007*.