

Critical, Strategic, Affiliated: Approaching Aesthetic Interventions

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Panelists:

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PROGRAM

Following the historical path of those cultural producers who affiliated closely with progressive political organizations and social movements, and who utilized the process and product of aesthetics to organize and educate so as to effect social change, this panel presents case studies of “organic” aesthetic urban interventions. These panelists are trying to make something happen in the social world, and as such, they strive for critical and strategic practices that affirm the cultures of social movements and question notions of community.

Participants each generate work from their particular vantage points. The panelists are artists, architects, and academics who theorize, teach, and write about form-making that engages appropriate political practice. Each places aesthetic discourse and the social production of art within the global transformations of the political economy, culture, and the rise of discursive hegemony in intellectual practice in general.

Equally important, they theorize their projects from their respective locations within the building of social movements in their respective geographies. They are partisans in urban confrontations. In these venues the relations of production that drive urban development are intimately connected to the aesthetic choices being made by community artists as well as city planners. Their tactics are polemical because the current political stakes in their communities are high. In each case, architecture, art, and aesthetics act as economic and ideological forces.

Accordingly, these producers of culture seek to root political theorizing as well as the practice of art-making within the social history of culture and community. Through their various approaches they seek to embody their work as critical, strategic, and affiliated. Key elements of this practice are: to recoup both the social militancy and the self-reflective substance of the term critical in the face of its widespread co-optation; to stand for a race, gender, and class politics in strategic resistance to the

political theories now dominating the discourse of the academy, and of architectural practices that misunderstand a deconstructive means as a destructive end; and to link the practices of architecture with the activities of progressive movements and organizations in not only a self-consciously located but as an explicitly affiliated practice.

This panel builds on the work by Antonio Gramsci and what may be called organic intellectual practice. For Gramsci, the concept of the organic intellectual functioned as a tentative answer to the question of developing revolutionary popular consciousness. Gramsci’s intellectuals were both leading and representative, as he understood theory to reach its greatest clarity when embodied in specific collective actions. His “new type of intellectual” could only be produced through the school of social movements for the purpose of political strategy.

Building on Gramsci holds the potential for this panel to challenge architects and artists to think about their practices and the aesthetic choices they make with regard to the following questions:

What is the relationship between aesthetic practice and intellectual work? What is the role of the intellectual (architect and artist) today? How is that role theorized in architectural discourse?

What are the obstacles to organic intellectual practice? How are organic intellectuals produced? Can the academy produce such an intellectual? What are the theories, institutions, and sites that must be nourished in order for organic intellectual practices to be possible?

What horizons open up if we examine how the processes and products of artistic intervention are understood pedagogically?

If we can conceive of affiliated artistic practices as sites for learning, how does learning take place in those contexts? How is it organized? What is learned?

Lastly, what kinds of aesthetic opportunities are afforded by practices that are based in close affiliation with social movements? What is their critical potential? What are the roles for aesthetic production and innovation in helping movements for change develop their political strategy? In other words, what are the opportunities for aesthetics to create political exposures?

PANELISTS

Lian Hurst Mann, Martin Hernandez

As the *Bus Rolls*: documents a collaborative project between Labor Community Strategy Center organizers and artists, Bus Rider Union/Sindicato de Pasajeros leaders and members, and Cornerstone Theater Company ensemble performers to enhance the ability of the Bus Riders Union to reach the 350,000 Los Angeles bus riders that constitute the “class” it now legally represents. The central objective of the project is to increase understanding of racial and ethnic difference and thereby enrich communication within the diverse yet predominantly low-income, of color, bus-riding “class” such that it becomes conscious of its common identity as a “community”—as part of an organizing campaign for civil rights in public transportation. The Labor Community Strategy Center and the Bus Riders Union/Sindicato de Pasajeros have together created one of the largest, most successful social movements in the country, with an integrated culture production component. The specific project centers on theatrical improvisation for on-the-bus-organizing with the goal of moving bus riders from plaintiffs to beneficiaries to actors in making their own history. Staging community interaction in a moving theater of daily life, the collaborative project develops live performances and approaches to “bus theater” and street theater that can be implemented in the organizing work.

Alma Lopez, Noni Olabisi

Two Public Art Cases in East and South Central LA: depicts how the design of murals were at the center of community participation for two communities in Los Angeles. The Digital Mural Project at Estrada Courts in East LA came through a collaborative process with the UCLA Cesar Chavez Muralism stu-

dents, the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC), and the Estrada Courts community to produce a public art project for the Estrada Courts Community. Estrada Courts is one of the oldest housing projects in East Los Angeles, built on a pre-existing neighborhood during World War II, and internationally recognized for its collection of Chicano murals painted in the 1970s. The process resulted in the production of six 8 ft. x 9 ft. digital murals that were installed and dedicated in May 1997.

The collaborative mural project at the Angeles Mesa Public Library by Homegirl Productions investigates Education as a Basic Human Right. Based upon historical research, this project utilized two school desegregation cases as a central theme to explore issues of representation in Black and Brown life in general, and in the changing demographic patterns of South Central in particular.

Valerie Tevere, Leonardo Vilchis

Concrete Projections: a mixed-media performance that challenges the conventions of art practice within the context of direct political action by depicting the struggle of Pico-Aliso residents against the demolition of their subsidized housing. The performance represented the struggle of public housing residents to save their community of over 1200 units from the plans of the city’s Housing Authority to demolish the entire housing development and make way for fewer low-income units and market rate privately owned condominiums. Still photography of residents, video of the fight to protect their homes, oral history of the community’s experience weighing its desperate need for housing against the urban renewal promise of better homes for fewer people, and rock music simulcast on local radio were intermingled with a variety of slogans by architects capturing the mythologies of community design in a multimedia installation within the housing project. After nearly two years of work with residents, participation in organizing meetings, and documentation of the struggle, the work that resulted was projected onto the walls of the housing project with music blaring in a finale fiesta on the eve of the demolition. Work of this type is long in the making and temporary in nature; the event is the actual aesthetic intervention, yet the documentation of the struggle and the event survives as a record of both this turning point in urban history and the role of artists as participants in the making of that history.