

Tactical Irrelevance: Art and Politics at Play

Sarah Kanouse

Questions about the relation of art and politics often become more urgent in moments of political turmoil and crisis. The present-day context of neoliberal globalization and militaristic neo-conservatism has prompted many artists to abandon representational politics and the fostering of dialog in favor of intervening more directly in social relations. In this paper, an artist discusses her own work through the lens of Jacques Rancière's philosophical writings on aesthetics and politics. The question of artistic autonomy—long considered antithetical to radical or committed art—is reframed as a privileged position from which foundational assumptions about what the political field is can be challenged and reformulated.

The Limits of Art: An Introduction

During the student demonstrations in Paris last spring, a film student came into my office agitated and wanting to talk. With young people in France demonstrating against a new, age-discriminating employment law that placed them in essentially the same position as almost everyone in the US workforce, my student had his share of questions. His concerns centered not on the cynical, ungrateful and unruly French youth depicted in the US media: too bullheaded to understand that the law was designed to help them, unwilling to work or study to get ahead, but quite able to get the government to back down in the face of a mass tantrum. Instead, his voice was filled with an aching and restless desire as he asked, “Why couldn’t that happen here?”¹

Despite the rather rapid rhetorical move from the “end of history” to the “clash of civilizations,” the present political moment breeds either blind acquiescence or the quietus of despair. For those lingering malcontents like my hapless film student eyeing faraway uprising with envy, neoliberalism says, “That could never happen here,” and the neoconservative twist adds, “and you’re unpatriotic even to entertain the idea.” Even those of us who have fought all our lives for change find ourselves secretly and sadly suspecting the truth of Maggie Thatcher’s retort, “there is no alternative.” Some, most visibly Judith Halberstam, have advocated embracing the present moment of ‘failure’ for the unexpected opportunities and tactical possibilities it might provide.² Yet the actions taken in Paris—along with the teacher’s strike in Oaxaca, student uprisings in Greece and China, and mass demonstrations

across the US for migrant rights—make clear that there are many who believe in, work for, and still occasionally die seeking alternatives.

In light of the courage and creativity of resistance movements across the globe, I often find it difficult to justify my choice to be a “professional artist.” Advocates for and makers of political art have frequently exaggerated the effectiveness of aesthetic intervention as much as Plato overestimated its threat when he called to ban artists from the Republic. What can the work of art do, really, against the work of the World Bank? The efficacy of art is difficult to establish in an evaluative paradigm that looks for quantifiable outcomes that unfold in observable time scales. Political *culture*—my preferred terrain of engagement—changes slowly and incrementally indeed. However, in the present state of perpetual emergency, something more than artists’ typically vague claims about raising awareness and promoting dialogue seem necessary. How might we make operating in the relatively untroubled spaces of art practice—where every tempest might well disturb no more than the contents of a teacup—more than an exercise in emotional self-preservation and into a considered political response?

The question of artistic relevance is, of course, an old and arguably unanswerable one. However, thinking about ‘relevance’ as a methodology rather than an outcome opens up productive avenues for socially-engaged art. As Don Mitchell and Lynn Staeheli have argued of geography, “the issue of what makes research relevant cannot be separated from the questions of why research should be relevant, how research becomes relevant, the goals of research, and for whom it is intended to be relevant.”³ An analogous line of inquiry can be developed for art practice that is responsive to art’s unique and shifting institutional, political, and cultural positioning. Instead of relaunching stalemated debates such as “must art serve politics?,” this line of inquiry might begin by interrogating the supposed *irrelevance* of art, examining the apparent gap between art and action, and rethinking recent strategies that have brought art and politics together. In other words, rather than wringing our hands over our disconnection from “real” politics, socially-engaged cultural workers might paradoxically embrace the gap between art and action and see this separateness as uniquely contributing to the ongoing process by which any form of cultural practice *becomes* relevant.

In this essay, I use the trope of artistic irrelevance as a strategic opportunity for more precisely and usefully considering the relation of art and politics. Leaning on French philosopher Jacques Rancière’s provocative work on the politics of aesthetics, I argue that ‘political art’ may be uniquely positioned to produce a ‘metapolitics:’ a set of conditions within which political action—outside both the confines of the artwork and the conventionally political—will become more possible for more people. Rancière’s work suggests a discursive method for analyzing socially-engaged artwork which I illustrate by discussing my 2004 project *The Public Square*.⁴ Finally, I position *The Public Square* in relation to current debates in the field of socially-engaged art, drawing on the recent work of Claire Bishop and Grant Kester, to argue for a politics of dissensus that balances both aesthetic and material commitments. In the end, I hope these questions about the relationship of aesthetic and political activity will encourage us all—artists and scholars, citizens

and subjects—to think more clearly what we’re asking when we ask artists to “be political.”

Tactical Irrelevance and the Politics of Artistic Autonomy

Radical philosopher Jacques Rancière has argued for a redefinition of the terms of debate concerning the places where politics and art intersect. He describes politics as something much more basic and expansive than our received textbook definitions. According to Rancière, “Politics is not the exercise of power or the struggle for power. Politics is first of all the configuration of a space as political, the framing of a specific sphere of experience, the setting of objects posed as “common” and subjects to whom the capacity is recognized to designate these objects and argue about them.”⁵ In books such as *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, *Disagreement* and *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Rancière has articulated what he calls a ‘metapolitics’ that “brings political or ideological “appearances” back to the reality of socioeconomic relations.”⁶ This metapolitics disrupts the false dichotomy that would set acts of representational power (art) against acts of material power (politics). Instead, he advocates a “poetics of politics” and a “poetics of knowledge” that together create the scenarios and vocabularies for the world to be understood and then changed. Rancière rejects prescriptions about art’s role in representing or obscuring *political issues* in favor of considering how aesthetic activity enlarges the scope of *political possibility*. “The dream of a suitable political work of art,” he writes, “is in fact the dream of disrupting the relationship between the visible, the sayable, and the thinkable without having to use the terms of a message as a vehicle...As a matter of fact, political art cannot work in the simple form of a meaningful spectacle that would lead to an ‘awareness’ of the state of the world.”⁷

In arguing that it takes more than an issue-oriented message to make political art, Rancière might seem simply to rehash arguments made familiar by a litany of radical artists and thinkers, from Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov to Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht to Jean-Luc Godard and Guy Debord. Yet his writing has become so influential to a diverse group of artists working today, especially in forms variously called relational or social aesthetics or dialogical art, that the blue-chip art magazine *ArtForum* dedicated most of its March 2007 issue to considering his ideas. Part of what distinguishes him from these predecessors is that he does not view art’s role as galvanizing the spectator into self-consciousness and action. He gives much more credit to the *viewer*, reminding us that “to look and to listen requires the work of attention, selection, reappropriation, a way of making one’s own film, one’s own text, one’s own installation out of what the artist has presented.”⁸ Instead of activating supposedly inactive spectators, significant political art works “suspend the ordinary coordinates of sensory experience and reframe the network of relationships between spaces and times, subjects and objects, the common and the singular” in order to transform “the landscape of the possible.”^{9, 10}

Having cut his political teeth in the Paris of May 1968—which prompted him to

split with his philosophical mentor, Louis Althusser—Rancière is particularly well-positioned to address recent dissident artistic projects that take their inspiration from the forms of desirous, embodied protest exemplified by the Situationist-inspired student movement. While many of these practices deal with timely political content, most are also concerned, more or less explicitly, with creating different understandings of what constitutes the political. In recent history, topically political issues have been engaged by ‘interventionists’ from the Yippies of the 1960s to the Yes Men of today, and their use of humor and irreverence in making serious political points has been picked up by many artist-activists who strive to communicate through metaphor and play. These efforts are often explained with the “spoonful of sugar” argument: a complex or challenging point made humorously is less alienating and easier for an audience to swallow. Yet the significance of these forms of cultural-political activism goes beyond the tactics of persuasion. They also embody an irreverent attitude toward authority and promote a culture of aesthetic democracy that prefigures a politics much more ecstatic and embodied than everyday experiences in the market/workplace *and* the lobbying and petitioning that underpin so much of conventional Euro-American political participation. This analysis of the political function of cultural action echoes claims long made for Dadaist performances, Situationist *dérivés*, and the games and whimsical instruction pieces coming out of Fluxus. In this view, aesthetic activity is something different than conventional political discourse by more accessible means, and that in that difference lays its power.

According to Rancière, the aesthetic domain is a place where people have the luxury of reframing the foundational precepts on which issue-oriented politics are based. Yet for art to work in this way, it must resist collapsing into politics and instead use liberal-bourgeois tradition of ‘artistic autonomy’ strategically without losing sight of how that position is situated in institutional power relations. For Rancière, the concept of the aesthetic is a profoundly paradoxical condition that both defines art practice as part of a rarefied, elite world knowable only by the powerful while also simultaneously producing a sensual experience that exists wholly outside the logic of domination. This experience also constitutes a “dismissal of that partition of the sensible” that would render aesthetics apart from the struggles of everyday life. Because the European tradition has held art as a separate sphere of human activity both above and outside of historical and political realities, discourses and practices of art today paradoxically offer semi-autonomous spaces in which the veracity of neoliberalism’s claims might be questioned in relative safety and new formulations of subjectivity, collectivity, and agency might be formed.

Such an observation will hardly be earth-shattering to anyone accustomed to considering capitalism and its cultures dialectically; the conditions produced by capital always contain the nascent energies of its defeat. In the early 1990s, Marxist literary critic Terry Eagleton offered an outline of the historical development of the idea of the aesthetic in European thought in which he discusses quite lucidly the paradox of artistic autonomy:

It is not only, as radical thought has familiarly insisted, that art is

thereby conveniently sequestered from all other social practices, to become an isolated enclave within which the dominant social order can find an idealized refuge from its own actual values of competitiveness, exploitation and material possessiveness. It is also, or rather more subtly, that the idea of autonomy—of a mode of being which is entirely self-regulating and self-determining—provides the middle class with just the ideological model of subjectivity it requires for its material operations. Yet this concept of autonomy is radically double-edged: if on the one hand it provides a central constituent element of bourgeois ideology, it also marks an emphasis on the self-determining nature of human powers and capacities which becomes...a vision of human energies as radical ends in themselves which is the implacable enemy of all dominative or instrumentalist thought.¹²

Following Eagleton, then, the artist's task appears to be pushing the aesthetic from functioning as a screen for the ideology of capital toward its capacity to unleash liberatory and self-determining human energies. The blithe irrelevance of art through most of Euro-American history ends up serving a tactical purpose: art can become a relatively safe and 'conveniently sequestered' space not for obscuring or aestheticizing capitalism, but within which people might play with new forms of agency and enhance their expectations for participation in the politics routinely encountered in everyday life.

While Rancière's expansive notion of dissident art practice continues a lineage of non-instrumentalist, broadly Left theorization of the politics of aesthetics, his work has experienced far greater popularity than most of his predecessors. While it is useful to view his all-out embrace by gatekeeping curators, critics, and editors in the globalized world of project-based art with some skepticism, his work is nonetheless useful for artists interested in thinking rigorously about what we might be best suited to do as political beings. Due to the paradoxical quality of artistic autonomy—that it produces responses that refuse the confines of the institutions in which they unfold—Rancière is not interested in prescribing certain content, settings or audiences for the critical artist. However, his model suggests a set of questions useful for considering how artworks function politically. In what ways does a project reframe the ordinary coordinates of experience in a particular place and time? In what ways does the project incorporate or respond to the open-ended engagement, reflection, and contribution of the audience? How are the customary limits of the doable, thinkable, and sayable questioned or, better yet, moved by the work?

Building Community on Borrowed Time

In the spring of 2004, I launched *The Public Square*, a three-week series of daily public events that were broadcasted over low power radio and accompanied by a museum installation and streaming audio on the internet.¹³ The project served both as my MFA thesis project and a parting gift to Champaign-Urbana, IL, a town

where I had lived as student and non-student, artist and activist, neighbor and friend. The project experimented with a hybrid model of a public square formed equally of institutional and classically ‘public’ spaces as well as old and new communications media.¹⁴ Four discursive and physical sites formed the corners of the conceptual square around which the project was structured. The first site was the museum, where an installation consisting of microphones, a mixer, a computer and other equipment collected and streamed museum sound 24 hours per day. The microphones were intended to rupture the customary spectatorial silence of the museum and to invite gallery visitors to step up and speak out. The project’s web site, where the stream of museum sound could be heard, formed the second ‘corner’ of the conceptual public square. While the museum installation and Web site named the project as “art,” the final two sites did not need to be understood in that way by participants. Each day, for the duration of the exhibition, a group gathered outdoors for an assembly in public space. These gatherings were announced over an email list and on local bulletin boards as well as on the project Web site, and the announcements connected each action to the overall project. Some activities were planned for the project by me or people I invited to help, while others were events that would have happened anyway—an anti-war vigil, a meeting of an alternative newspaper collective—but which the project then highlighted and reframed. Events ranged from overtly political guerilla theater (mock weapons inspections of the engineering campus) to civic-minding, perambulating discussions on urban planning to informal parties in which participants exchanged used clothing on the steps of the mall or gave out free food on the sidewalk in front of Pizza Hut. Each of



The Public Square, 2004. Installation in the Krannert Art Museum, Champaign, IL. Photo by Nathan Keay.

these events was broadcast via the fourth ‘corner’ of the proposed public square: the ‘site’ of unlicensed FM radio, which listeners in the area could pick up at home or, depending on the range, at the installation in the gallery.

The project was apprehended differently in these different contexts. When marked as art, either in the gallery or online, the project was generally discussed as a conceptual whole, with attention given to the model of public space proposed by the physical and mediated acts I staged. Others read an implicit critique of the art gallery in my decision to publicize what happened inside it (through the streaming audio) and to locate the overwhelming majority of the “artwork” outside of it.¹⁵ Outside of an art context, participant responses emphasized the activity being conducted, with relatively little verbal engagement with the overall framing mechanism. Each event was, however, planned to implicitly or explicitly critique or challenge normative uses of outdoor and ostensibly ‘public’ space as well as to make direct use of the ostensibly public but highly regulated airwaves.¹⁶ In many gatherings, people commented directly on the relationship between the activity and the space, even when they simply happened along the event and decided to join. For example, during the clothing exchange at the mall, a group of teenagers and children waiting for the bus near our group asked if they could participate. One young girl shouted enthusiastically that we were trading clothes for free, even at the mall.¹⁷ When a local political theater group organized mock weapons inspections of the university’s engineering campus as part of the project, one aeronautics lab researcher they confronted eventually agreed that perhaps the public should be able to question them about their research directly.¹⁸ It was not important to me whether people at the events “got” the theoretical arguments the project as a whole proposed concerning the constitution of public space, understood the project in light of traditions of socially-engaged art, or thought it to be art at all. What was more important



“Food Not Bombs” event organized by Zoe and Faith Swords, Zoe Ginsburg, and Sarah Lazare for *The Public Square*, Pizza Hut, Champaign, IL, May 7, 2004. The group organizing this event continued to operate as a local chapter of Food Not Bombs. Photo by Sarah Kanouse.

was that participants engaged an ordinary space—such as the mall—in new ways, as in bartering, that reflected their shifting expectations about how that space and the people in it could operate in the future.

The Public Square involved scores of people from all the parallel groups I'd worked with during my six years in town: independent media activists, obviously, but also undergraduate art students; peace and social justice religious leaders but also high-school aged 'unschoolers;' mothers of inmates, but also reclusive scientists working for the National Center for Supercomputing Applications (NCSA). A city council member participated in two events; a middle school conflict resolution counselor organized a special project with her class for another. The events often attracted people who were professionally involved in an institution working around a particular topic or theme, but the gatherings created an extra-institutional, discursive, and relational space for re-considering the topic. For example, an acquaintance who worked for the NCSA organized a discussion about the privatization of public research in the outdoor picnic area of the University of Illinois research park, a relatively new facility on campus dedicated to commercializing professors' science and engineering breakthroughs. A few NCSA scientists, other campus researchers, a physics graduate student, and a new media art professor discussed the shifting role of the university in ways that foregrounded philosophical and personal concerns rather than their professional roles. However, the nature of the specific gathering changed dramatically depending on who organized it, those who came, what was done, and where it took place. My decision to invite others to organize gatherings was practical because it spread out the workload and brought in new audiences from different social milieus, but it was also conceptually significant in that it allowed me to relax my control over what happened in the model of public space I proposed. I wanted to create a space where a mixing of interests and identi-



“Open Science and the Commercialized University” event organized by John Martirano for *The Public Square*, University of Illinois Research Park, Champaign, IL, May 3, 2004. Photo by Nathan Keay.

fications could occur without dictating consensus but with the faith that something—and not necessarily something obvious or concrete or instrumental—would survive beyond the project and well after I moved away from the town.

The gatherings were usually small—an average of ten people came to each event, sometimes fewer and occasionally many more. However, some long-term organizing efforts came out of the project: the group that organized the free food giveaway became the Champaign-Urbana chapter of Food Not Bombs, an anarchist-inspired movement of people who provide free meals to the public from scavenged food. Evaluating the project quantitatively in this way seems inappropriate, however, *The Public Square* was not about activating some number of ‘inactive’ people. Many of the participants were already activists, and I welcomed all people to the events to share what they already knew or were already doing. Nor was it really about catalyzing long-term organizational efforts, though that is certainly a welcomed by-product. Instead, the project sought to animate social relations and the spaces in which they unfold to allow both for enhanced participation and to allow those activities to be situated in a context in which they might be understood anew.

I anticipated some of my audience to be put off by the unlicensed radio component of the project, but no one who attended the events expressed doubts about participating.¹⁹ Although Champaign-Urbana is an unusually progressive town—a place where the Indymedia center recently purchased the post office—I was continually surprised by the absolute comfort with which people approached using pirate radio. While we were nearly kicked out of a women’s softball game due to coaches’ concerns that our microphone violated NCAA rules, no fan seemed worried or frightened to know that their words were on the air. Indeed, they eagerly called the plays and interspersed casual political commentary in a homegrown broadcast of the game, and we were allowed to stay “this time only.” There seemed to be something so intuitively ‘right’ about taking to the airwaves informally that the actual fact of its illegality (attenuated by the slim chance of getting caught) mattered very little to anyone. In my view, this pleasant surprise has become, over time, the most successful element of the project. The audience/participants identified with the act of seizing the airwaves and, crucially, *disidentified* with the legal regime that proscribed that action. The project involved numerous small gestures of disobedience against civil laws and civil norms that implicated everyone involved—from the teens at the mall who joined the clothing exchange to the university that hosted the exhibition (and unwittingly provided a rooftop for a pirate radio antenna). In a small, tentative, and relatively risk-free way, people could test less circumscribed forms of action, explore new intersubjective identifications, and enhance and amplify their expectations for more broad future participation. The ‘irrelevance’ of the art project—the fact that it wasn’t ‘really’ politics—allowed people to experience very different relationships to institutions, commerce, politics and each other.

Considering *The Public Square* three years after the fact allows other readings to emerge, ones based less on the experience of the individual events and more on how the events, broadcasts, and installations functioned when taken as a whole. It’s clear that the events, while not sidelining politicized content, often did not operate in conventionally political modes: participants were left with no single burning



“Readings from the Cell Block” event organized by Adam Davis for *The Public Square*, Champaign County Courthouse, Urbana, IL, May 4, 2004. Photo by Sarah Kanouse.

issue to protest, no word to spread, no concrete action to take. By continually looking to participants to animate public spaces and deflecting resolution and conclusion back to the audience, the arena of the political was left open for reinterpretation and ready for new forms of action. The wide variety of events the project highlighted re-framed the subjects and spaces of politics to include activities that are not overtly political (such as bartering clothes) and places where politics are normally vigorously excluded (such as the mall). Though varied, the events were all social and usually outdoors, stressing the value of the collective and accessible in contrast to the private, consumer-driven forms of agency held up by the market. The project suggested that a vital public square is not only the rational discussions idealized by Jürgen Habermas, though those remain vital. By including unruly, instrumental, and emotional events like teenagers giving away free food in front of Pizza Hut and parents reading their incarcerated children’s letters in front of the courthouse, the project recontextualized these activities as central to an *inclusive* and *relational* public sphere. By broadcasting these events via radio or streaming them online, the project suggested that encounters in a physical public space are vitally connected with communication in the public space of the media.

Being Political and Doing Politics

The Public Square and other projects like it—the Autonomous Territories of Chicago, The Department of Space and Land Reclamation, PILOT TV, and more—

differ from other forms of artwork that emphasize direct, intersubjective encounters between artist and audience, initiators and participants in significant ways.²⁰ Grant Kester has emphasized the transformative role of conversation and process in socially-engaged art.²¹ He closely analyzes what he calls the ‘dialogic art’ of the Austrian art collective WochenKlauser, who stage interventions into policy around social issues. In projects like *Intervention to Qualify Former Drug Abusers for Occupation* and *Intervention in Community Development*, WochenKlauser bridges the ‘conveniently sequestered’ space of art practice and the bureaucratized processes of urban administration in order to find new ways to allocate resources and services in or on behalf of a community, to organize common material and symbolic space, and to give voice to a marginalized group.²² The group accomplishes its work not through the disruptive tactics of the demonstration or irreverent game, but instead through a *sustained* commitment to mutual identification so that mutual goals can be developed and accomplished. Kester contends that WochenKlauser’s dialogic aesthetics understands the possibility for social transformation to be “not simply as an instantaneous, prediscursive flash of insight, but as a decentering, a movement outside self (and self-interest) through dialogue extended over time.”²³ His emphasis on the importance of sustained commitment echoes the almost axiomatic position in community art circles that projects of long duration, preferably initiated by an artist with even longer-term local roots or with a group ‘insider’ as collaborator, are preferable to one-shot interventions or high-energy, short duration projects like *The Public Square*.

Yet the process of many short term projects is more complex: the experience of intensely working together forges identification with a common task, and the identifications produced through these projects help create a common history that can animate future work in ways that are difficult to document or to predict. Furthermore, the ‘burst’ model is in many ways a frank acknowledgment of the position of the (young) artist in the neoliberal city. In an era of extreme capital mobility to which many people, especially youth, must adjust as best they can, it is unrealistic to expect artists and cultural activists to put down roots for five or ten years before they can start making work that addresses the conditions where they live. The temporary, high-energy, festive event is perhaps a response to a situation of chronic economic precarity, with a working life cobbled together from numerous odd jobs that makes a sustained, consistent, long-term engagement with one project and one group simply impossible.

Claire Bishop has expressed reservations about what she sees as the tendency of the critical response to relational or dialogical work to emphasize the ethics of its production over its aesthetico-political effect. Positioning herself as a critic sympathetic to its goals but skeptical about its framing, she argues that Kester’s dialogical aesthetics fosters a discourse of ethical absolutism whereby collaborative work is always “better” than non-collaborative work because of the intentions and process of the artists, regardless of how it actually functions aesthetically. She charges that this critical framework unconsciously reinscribes a Judeo-Christian morality of self-sacrifice “in which art is valued for its truthfulness and educational efficacy rather than for inviting us...to confront darker, more painfully complicated considerations of our predicament.”²⁴ Interestingly, she draws on Rancière’s *The Politics of Aes-*

thetics for a way out of straight-jacketing assumptions about the “proper” relations of art and politics. Bishop also criticizes the ameliorative approach to political life exemplified by some relational projects as symptomatic of what Slavoj Žižek has called the “post-political” age and, following political philosophers Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, questions whether even provisional consensus is what democratic impulses should ever seek.

‘Burst’ events like *The Public Square* do not foster ‘dialogue extended over time’ or seek to generate a consensus, however provisional, between people with different levels of institutional power. Instead, they exhibit a marked suspicion that consensus is the preferred outcome of dialogue and that institutional priorities can ever be renegotiated at the interpersonal level. Rather than reading the gatherings as generating local, consensual knowledge, it would be more accurate to describe them as generating local, provisional coalitions or antagonisms. *The Public Square* sited its conversations and events in locations where their content—even if the participants ended up agreeing with one another—would still symbolically contest the organization of the space in which they took place, while the unchanging presence of the institutional space stood as a reminder of the partial and preliminary nature of the artistic intervention. For instance, at the university research park, it was clear that the ‘problem’ of the commercialization of higher education was not ‘solved’ through our discussion alone—nor did the group even agree on the nature of the ‘problem’. However, it remains significant that the discussion took place in the research park because it temporarily disrupted what Rancière calls “the relationship between the visible, the sayable, and the thinkable” in that particular place. Projects like *The Public Square* don’t try to coax the powerful to identify with the powerless, but instead seek to reframe on a local and experimental level how social and political life might be approached in open ended and participatory ways that refuse instrumentalization and forestall agreement.

The importance of the difference between the consensual—some might say therapeutic or administrative—politics promoted by Kester and the foundational dissensus advocated by Rancière, Laclau and Mouffe cannot be overstated. At stake is the very definition of what politics is and at what levels in the constitution of the political might artists intervene. Kester and WochenKlauser seem drawn to a pragmatic approach of staging policy interventions that is rooted in a liberal or progressive ethic. Such work has had admirable success that should not be understated. WochenKlauser’s *Intervention to Aid Drug-Addicted Women* of 1994 established a shelter in Zurich that is still operating today.²⁵ By contrast, the interventions staged by *The Public Square* and similar projects occur on the level of how the political is constituted and who and what are therefore given access to or excluded from it. Conclusions about these questions are continually forestalled, and the artwork seeks not so much to find an answer as to stage a disagreement that operates on many levels—material, symbolic, and discursive.

When we ask for art to ‘be political,’ then, we should be clear about our expectations and the assumptions about politics embedded in them. Do we expect the artwork to effect material change, and if so, how, for how long, and for whom? Or do we want the artwork to use its autonomy to reframe our concept of the political? Because I tend towards Rancière’s view that art functions politically without neces-

sarily being ‘about’ politics, I’d like to avoid making prescriptions for what a dissident art must be or do. Because I respect the way that Kester’s dialogical aesthetic often results in material, rather than exclusively discursive, results, I stop short of criticizing the work as some kind of aestheticized social service (as Kester much earlier, in fact, criticized in some artists’ works).²⁵ While dialogic art must still “suspend the ordinary coordinates of sensory experience and reframe the network of relationships between spaces and times, subjects and objects, the common and the singular,” to borrow Rancière’s words, it must still reach some kind of a shifting accommodation with those ‘ordinary coordinates’ to be realized materially.²⁶ At what point does playing with alternate constitutions of politics and testing new forms of agency translate into the kinds of collective and conventionally political action my students, and indeed I myself, yearn to join and that remain so vital? Exactly how to balance these diverging commitments—to a politics predicated on dissension and an aesthetics that aspires to be realized by bodies in spaces over time—remains an unanswered, perhaps unanswerable question. Many people are working, both alone and together, on practicing the answers.

In memory of Michael Piazza, who instructed a generation of Chicago artists in the methods, aesthetics, and politics of social practice. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Union for Democratic Communications conference in 2006.

Notes

1. I have discussed elsewhere this common formulations—why couldn’t that happen here?—and the role of art in re-engaging young people with the radical history of the United States. See Sarah Kanouse, “Performing Haymarket,” *Acme: An International E-Journal of Critical Geographies*, forthcoming Fall 2007.
2. Halberstam has been delivering her lecture “Notes on Failure” to international audiences since 2005. See her curriculum vita online at <http://egomego.com/judith/cv.htm>. Last accessed April 27, 2007.
3. Lynn A. Staeheli and Don Mitchell, “The Complex Politics of Relevance in Geography,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 95(2), 2005, p. 357.
4. Gillian Rose describes discursive methods in her book *Visual Methodologies*, drawing a distinction between those that emphasize “the production and rhetorical organization of visual and textual materials” and those that are “much more concerned with their production by and their reiteration of, particular institutions...and human subjects.” Although Rose criticizes the latter approach for underestimating the significance of the visual in visual material, I have found it to be well-suited to evaluating relational projects that leave relatively few visual traces but whose stated goals are to intervene in the production of institutions and subjectivities. Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An*

Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials, London: Sage: 2001, p.164.

5. Jacques Rancière, "Aesthetics and Politics: Rethinking the Link," <http://www.16beavergroup.org/monday/archives/001881.php>. Last accessed May 8, 2006.
6. Davide Panagia, "Dissenting Words: A Conversation with Jacques Rancière," *Diacritics*, no. 2 (2000), p. 117.
7. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 63.
8. Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey, "Art of the Possible: Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey in Conversation with Jacques Rancière," *ArtForum*, March 2007, p. 264. While the quotation is taken from this recent interview, the idea that there is no such thing as an inactive or unaware spectator has been part of Rancière's work at least since *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, originally published in 1987.
9. Rancière, "Aesthetics and Politics: Rethinking the Link."
10. Carnevale and Kelsey, "Art of the Possible," p. 264."
11. Ibid.
12. Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. 9.
13. Sarah Kanouse, "The Public Square," (Champaign-Urbana, IL: 2004). Project archived online at <http://www.readysubjects.org/projects/publicsquare/index.html>.
14. The definition of public space is the subject of complex scholarly and legal debates. For the purposes of this public project, however, I chose to use a "common sense" rather than legal or scholarly definition: a public space is a place that appears to invite people to use it for free. Accordingly, I included spaces that were privately owned (such as the mall, a private park outside a Catholic hospital, and benches beside a media company's parking lot) but which permit limited public use. I was also interested in determining where exactly limitations on public use would be drawn, but even when our assemblies attracted attention, they were never shut down. My own understanding of public space is based on the critiques of Jürgen Habermas mounted by political theorists Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau's notion of radically democratic political space; architect Michael Sorkin's work on the privatization and militarization of civic space; the reading of urban art practices by art historian Rosalyn Deutsche; and geographer Don Mitchell's argument for the importance of space for social justice movements. See bibliography for references.
15. In describing audience response in this context, I am relying on comments made during the exhibition opening and a formal verbal critique with art critic Lisa Wainwright. The project was also the winner of the radical art and communication festival Memefest in the Web art category in 2004, in which jurors relied entirely on project documentation and framing to make their determination.

16. The audio of most of the public events can be downloaded as mp3s from the project archive: http://www.readysubjects.org/projects/publicsquare/publicsquare_html/archive.html.
17. Responses during the mock weapons inspections varied, with many researchers brushing off questions on their way to lunch. My example is taken from a debrief session I held following the event on April 27, 2004.
18. Ironically, the entirely legal webstream of the museum sound aroused the only negative comment I received about the use of media in the project. One viewer, a painting professor, was incensed that his conversation in the museum was recorded and streamed, despite numerous signs warning visitors that live video and audio were being captured in two of the installations. While not wanting to read too much into his response, I was struck that a gallery artist reacted so negatively to my gesture of breaking the spectatorial silence of the museum and broadcasting its normally hermetic interior.
19. For more information on these projects, see Emily Forman and Daniel Tucker, eds., *Trashing the Neoliberal City: Autonomous Cultural Practices in Chicago from 2000 to 2005* (Copenhagen: Learning Site, 2007). Also available online at <http://learningsite.info/trashing003.htm>.
20. Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004).
21. WochenKlauser, "Intervention in Community Development," (Ottensheim, Austria: 1997), WochenKlauser, "Intervention to Qualify Former Drug Abusers for Occupation," (Vienna: 2003).
22. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, pp. 84-85.
23. Claire Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents," *ArtForum*, February 2006, p. 183.
24. WochenKlauser, "Intervention to Aid Drug-Addicted Women," (Zurich: 1994).
25. Grant Kester, "Aesthetic Evangelists: Conversion and Empowerment in Contemporary Community Art," *Afterimage* (1995).
26. Rancière, "Aesthetics and Politics: Rethinking the Link."

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Sarah Kanouse is an interdisciplinary artist examining citizenship, public space, landscape, and historical memory through arts practice, writing, and occasional curatorial work. In the last few years, her work has appeared in exhibitions mounted by Artlink (Belgrade, Serbia); Institute for Quotidian Arts and Letters (Milwaukee); Columbia College (Chicago); Women's Caucus for Art (Barnard College, New York); SOFA Gallery (Indiana University), Kupfer Center (University of Wisconsin Madison), Centro Cultural Rosa Luxemburg (Buenos Aires, Argentina), among others. Sarah's writings have been published in the Journal of Aesthetics and Protest, Acme, Critical Planning and Art Journal.