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Research working title: At the intersection of artistic practice and the city

Appearing in Public: The affordances of hopeless spaces

Abstract

The contemporary condition of the public realm might be seen as 'hopeless', as it is relentlessly co-opted by political and economic forces. The sense of 'hopelessness' constrains our ability to critically rethink ways to organise and inhabit space. This does not mean, however, that we cannot question and/or resist these processes and the roles art plays within them. In fact, it is crucial that we better understand how contemporary art practices participate in these processes whether through tactics of resistance or through inadvertent or knowing collusion.

How can artists challenge the way cities are designed, constructed and inhabited? What are the possible political and social consequences of doing this? This practice-led research is situated at the intersection of contemporary art practice and the city. It aims to interrogate the capacity of artistic practices operating in and about the public realm to expose and generate ideas about alternative ways to think through and produce the physical, social and cultural structures that frame and support everyday life. What strategies and tactics have been employed to do this? How successful have they been? What new forms of practice might be productive?

I address the research questions within three contexts: theory and discourse; study and critique of existing artworks/practices and the development of my own projects that implement tactics in real sites. I develop the argument that 'hopelessness' can potentially be countered through art practices that deploy particular kinds of tactics in public.

Theorists who worry about public space have staked claims within a shifting unsteady field that alternatively opens up and closes down spaces for productive artistic speculation. I look carefully at key texts and concepts developed by Hannah Arendt, Jürgen Habermas, Henri Lefebvre, Rosalyn Deutsche, Chantal Mouffe, Bruno Latour, Jacques Rancière, Grant Kester and Claire Bishop to establish the conceptual site and theoretical underpinning for my explorations through practice.

The study and critique strand focuses on the reception and afterlife (real and potential) of certain kinds of spatial and social artistic practices. The practices I investigate are carried out in and about the public realm and attempt to contribute to the generation of public discussion about topics of concern to the communities in which they take place. These practices may be ephemeral, relational (Bourriaud, 2002), dialogic (Kester, 2004) or possibly referred to as 'new genre' public art (Lacy, 1994). They include, among others, Suzanne Lacy's *Oakland Projects*, Hirschhorn's *Gramsci Monument* and French and Mottershead's *Shop Project*.

I interrogate ideas drawn from theory and critique through a series of my own live projects. These attempt to expose underlying processes that limit the scope of the public realm in order to propose tactics that enable new forms of collective imagination and action. The projects take place in publicly accessible sites and operate in the gap between the individual and traditional politics. These activities challenge preconceived notions of particular situations and/or places by discovering and activating their affordances through the use of physicality, humour, sociality and aesthetics.