

Whether institutional or artist-led, Philadelphia's contemporary public art initiatives reject conventional, decorative forms to intervene in a physical, social, and temporal matrix defined by economic extremes. In a city where vacant lots butt up against prime real estate, where historic sites and university campuses lie adjacent to low income housing, public projects not only must respond to pressing, civic issues, but also negotiate the gap between difficult present and weighty, colonial heritage. It is almost too easy to interpret Philadelphia's public art situation provincially, as the necessarily self-conscious production of a low-rent, tight-knit city, uncomfortably cast as New York's "Sixth Borough."¹ Yet, locally grounded as it is, social practice in Philadelphia raises important, general questions about what we consider "public" and who has agency in these ever-shifting spaces. Taking political activism as a model, artists investigate who controls the city's public resources and whose voices are heard in the public sphere. Working with and disrupting metaphorical and implied meanings of contemporary sites—through both physical and virtual means—they explore shared emotional experiences across social groups, while blurring boundaries between public and private. Their most successful work might be described as "social-specific," a hybrid form combining the aesthetic strategies of site-specific public art and the relational strategies of social practice.

Precedents for this localized, critical practice emerged in the 1970s, in part through institutional efforts to connect with wider audiences outside of galleries and sculpture parks. With this aim, Philadelphia Museum of Art's (PMA) Department of Urban Outreach organized temporary exhibits and community art projects, for example *Franklin's Footpath* (1972-76), a huge, striped street painting covering the museum district's portion of the Benjamin Franklin Parkway.² By co-producing the piece with Philadelphia School District students, Gene Davis energized local youth to rethink the area's significance. The Institute of Contemporary Art's (ICA) *Street Sights* (1980-81) placed art in conversation with the history and contemporary use of the city's shopping areas. Significantly, the nonprofit Association for Public Art (APA), formerly Fairmount Park Art Association (est. 1879), has

¹ Jessica Pressler, 'Philadelphia Story: The Next Borough,' *New York Times*, 14 August, 2005.

² Penny Balkin Bach, *Public Art in Philadelphia*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992, p. 149.

spearheaded several major commissioning programs that value the social specifics of particular sites as much as their topographies. APA's *Form and Function* (initiated in 1981) encouraged artists to propose permanently installed, sculptural works which creatively supplied a local need. Examples of realized projects include the *Louis Kahn Lecture Room* (1983) by Siah Armajani and *Fingerspan* (1987), a bridge designed by Jody Pinto at a site identified through the drawings of local residents.³

Developing in parallel to these new, institutionally supported art forms, independent artists and collectives produced experimental work informed, in part, by their experiences with activist and feminist organization. Founded in 1975, artist-led NEXUS Gallery, Bricolage, Étage (Environmental Theater and Gallery) and Old City Arts nurtured live and temporary projects in the public forums of vacant lots, empty streets and construction sites in Center City. Bricolage's *Taking Tiger Mountain* (1978) took inspiration from protests stalling the new I-76 highway, for one night hijacking a heap of earth designated for the highway's ramp.⁴ The performance and its civic parallel provide initial models for tackling questions of the constitution and control of public resources that Philadelphia's artists, and the Occupy movement, continue to pose in the present.

As part of the exhibition *Zoe Strauss: Ten Years* (2012), PMA offered a residency to Philadelphia-based duo Megawords, artists Dan Murphy and Anthony Smyrski. It was a fitting pairing: Strauss is known for her 2007 exhibition of photographs of South Philadelphia residents hung on the I-95 highway's supporting columns; Megawords' publications, installations and events deal explicitly with 'public space, public intervention and who gets to do what where.'⁵ Turning the now-defunct Department of Urban Outreach's mission inside-out, the duo interrogated the museum's own function as a civic space, negotiating free admission for their visitors and providing a notary service

³ Association for Public Art [<http://associationforpublicart.org/gallery/commissioning>].

⁴ Richard Torchia, 'Timeline & Index of Philadelphia-based Artist-Run Spaces,' *Vox Populi: We're Working On It*, Philadelphia: Vox Populi Gallery, 2010, pp. 98-100.

⁵ Dan Murphy, interview with Becky Huff Hunter, 2012.

from within their office-like installation.⁶ By hosting public discussions on issues such as ‘What Belongs in a City’ inside the museum’s walls, the artists symbolically handed back metropolitan decision making from the cultural elite to the ordinary citizen.

Commissioned through APA’s program *New•Land•Marks: public art, community and the meaning of place* (initiated in 2000), Pepón Osorio’s *I have a story to tell you...* (2003) addressed the Latino community’s self-perceived lack of a positive, public voice. The project fostered a sense of group value and visibility, as Osorio listened to shared histories and experiences, and collected photographs depicting meaningful events. In an update on sacred stained glass and traditional memorial, these black and white images were printed onto transparent panels and incorporated into an illuminated *casita*, or ‘little house.’ A useful meeting room and a monument to communal suffering and strength, it lies in the grounds of the Congreso de Latinos Unidos headquarters.⁷

Philadelphia’s independent curators also frequently work to reshape the meanings of significant sites, and to reclaim them for public use. In a dramatic example of this transformational, curatorial agency, Julie Courtney and Todd Gilens’ large-scale exhibition *Prison Sentences: The Prison as Site/The Prison as Subject* (1995) began with a 1990 visit to the near-derelect, eleven-acre Eastern State Penitentiary. It was then a contested site caught between its dual status as a robust, but vacant, property and historic landmark, under the joint care of the commercial Redevelopment Authority and the conservationist Eastern State Task Force. After five years of planning and fundraising, twenty artists installed temporary projects within individual cells and blocks, teasing out the building’s multiple contemporary associations, from sexual politics to adult literacy. Fiona Templeton’s *Cells of Release* (1995) displayed information on prisoners of conscience and the facility, through Amnesty International, to advocate on their behalf, another example of an activist model of intervention translated into public art. The show was featured in the *New York Times* and on the BBC; the site’s

⁶ Megawords Magazine [<http://megawordsmagazine.com/great-things-ahead>].

⁷ Association for Public Art [<http://associationforpublicart.org/gallery/commissioning>].

visitors doubled, paving the way for its World Monument Fund listing in 1996.

Several *Prison Sentences* pieces addressed the collective trauma that surrounds experiences of crime and punishment, alluding to broken families and the mental stress of solitary confinement. Richard Torchia's later, long-running installation of eighteen ephemeral works at Eastern State's cell block two, *DAYLIGHTS: Camera Obscura Projections and Other Interventions* (1997-2001), similarly encouraged empathy with prisoners isolated in keeping with the penitentiary's Quaker-inspired, rehabilitatory mission. Works such as *Arbor* (1997) and *Watching (The Watch Tower)* (1997) cast cells as primitive camera obscuras, using original skylights and installed lenses to throw exterior images of natural form and prison masonry onto cell walls, floors and beds. One carefully focused projection even appeared to dissolve a cell window's iron grille, providing an illusory means of escape.⁸ Acknowledging that architectural divisions are social divisions, Torchia immaterially disrupted age-old boundaries between public and penal space, guard and guarded, and convict and contemporary prison visitor.

A founder of Women Organized Against Rape in 1971, Jody Pinto's temporary projects were precursors to Torchia's empathic interventions into unused spaces, and prepared ground for more recent site-based works that attempt to process traumatic, shared feelings of loss, failure and threat. One of artist-led NEXUS Gallery's first exhibitors, in the late 1960s and 1970s she sought healing reciprocation between the social body and Philadelphia's derelict land. For *Well Projects* (1974-77), she excavated nineteenth-century watering holes and cisterns in locations including the PENDOT landfill, sometimes leaving handmade canvas bundles and found wood, straw and artefacts within the brick-lined hollows. Never reifying a static past, or site, Pinto treated the city as an 'exciting "live" workshop' in which shifting metaphoric material spoke to contemporary emotional needs: 'The excavated wells and abandoned buildings were like closed mouths, slowly opened, admitting

⁸ Richard Torchia, exhibition text accompanying *DAYLIGHTS: Camera Obscura Projections and Other Interventions* (1997-2001).

new breath, exhaling experience.’⁹

Martha McDonald’s *Lament* (2006) was a recent, natural extension of this therapeutic form of public practice into spoken and sung performance. Taking place at the historic Bartram’s Garden in West Philadelphia in collaboration with Katie Holten, the piece was part of ICA’s *Soft Sites* (2006) exhibition, which sought to contrast the fluidity of the contemporary site with the weighty significance of traditional landmarks. Wearing a white linen costume and green gardening gloves embroidered with the technical terms for flowers and feelings, McDonald dropped a trail of seeds as she led visitors on a botanic tour. Her research into eighteenth-century naturalist William Bartram’s preservation of near-extinct plant species sparked interweaving, personal and global narratives of grief, destruction and inadequacy: loosening up the historically-loaded site into a prompt for free association and safe emotional expression. She wrote: ‘*Lament* drew on the Victorian language of flowers--a means of communicating through coded messages that allowed people to express feelings they were not free to speak aloud.’¹⁰

The *Space Savers Project* (2011-12), initiated by artist Christopher P McManus, used sculpture to encourage residents of certain Philadelphia streets to reassess their fraught, emotional investment in the illegal, but ingrained, local practice of saving parking spaces with cones, cement blocks and other street items, fostering gentle community dialogue about the objects’ implied physical threat. Adhering to the standard 7.5’ x 9’ dimensions of a Philadelphia parking space, eleven artists installed alternative space savers throughout the city. Brent Wahl’s *MINE* (2012) spelled out the custom’s childishness with his son’s Tinker Toy pieces, while landscape architect Chris Landau’s bright tangerine *Table* (2012) turned traditional space saving materials, such as recycling bins, buckets and an old door, into ‘a riff on a picnic table.’ McManus explained: ‘Space saving is territorial, even

⁹ Jody Pinto, interview with Becky Huff Hunter.

¹⁰ Martha McDonald, artist statement on *Lament*, 2006.

alienating, but Chris' sculpture had the opposite effect. It brought people together.'¹¹ Scattered across multiple sites, the project focused on meaningful conversation over location.

The current ubiquity of digital distribution has further evolved the ways in which we individually and collectively process emotional, temporal and spatial experiences. Phillips Simkins' *Public Center for the Collection and Dissemination of Secrets* (1975) was a pre-web meditation on modern communications' somewhat threatening commingling of public and private space, a response to Watergate-era phone tapping. Part of ICA's *Made in Philadelphia* (1973-87) program, he invited 30th Street Train Station visitors to anonymously record their secrets and listen to confessions via telephone booths.¹² Emerging from Philadelphia now are public projects that remain grounded in the city's locality, while optimistically utilizing new media's ability to destabilize perceptions of physical space and catalyze group activity. Less critical than Simkins' installation of their framing communications structures, these new works inherit both the strengths and the flaws of their parent technologies.

Philadelphia Masque (2010) is an urban model and interactive game produced by Ibañez Kim Studio architects. Picture a city on screen, as detailed as any three-dimensionally mapped video game or movie setting; as you navigate the terrain, you notice that vacant lots are inhabited by strange creatures that appear to be constructed from glass, metal and other postmodern architectural elements. They form a network of digital "agents" in a critical update on the Renaissance courtly masque, in which allegorical characters interact on an elaborate stage-set. These characters are determined by, and fixed to, their locations; for example, 'Romulus' - a towering, jagged, crystalline structure - embodies Philadelphia's founding and occupies Independence Mall. When activated, agents visually disrupt and rearrange the city's grid, proposing new alignments between areas of town typically separated by physical distance and real estate value. As a purely virtual model, the

¹¹ Christopher P. McManus, interview with Becky Huff Hunter, 2012.

¹² Penny Balkin Bach, *Public Art in Philadelphia*, 1992.

Masque reduces these differentials to mere data. An egalitarian move, the city's programmed flexibility showcases the bold, imaginative leaps in redefining public space that digitization facilitates. Dealing in data risks glossing over the concrete problems of struggling districts, but according to principal architect Simon Kim, the game demonstrates civic realities: 'As players move the characters, they cannot consistently "force" the outcomes as they would wish. In this way, there is a higher order of exposing the attempts by organizations and advocates of making or fixing an ideal city.'¹³

Still glitchy at less than three years in development, augmented reality (AR) smartphone technology requires the viewer's simultaneous on-the-spot and logged-on presence in order to work. Using GPS and visual recognition to capture users' surroundings live on screen, AR supplements this with additional images and data to visualize site-specific, networked fantasies. Online collective Manifest.AR, known for their guerrilla, digital installation of open submission art at MoMA, provide an example of this new field of practice. The group contributed AR apps to independent curator Kelani Nichole's *Distributed Collectives* (2011) exhibition at artist-led Little Berlin, intervening in Philadelphia's physical and temporal space. Visitors to the gallery's grassy, vacant lot could capture the green space via their smartphones' cameras and watch as the above-ground elements of a virtual New York-style subway station, *Metro-NeXt* (2011), were cut-and-pasted onto the on-screen, urban scene. This "wormhole" was an invitation from Caroline Bernard, Laile Pascual and John Craig Freeman to link up with viewers in other definite locations, as if in a multi-player video game. By shrinking the parameters of site-specificity to a personal, handheld scale, AR art constitutes an oddly private, illusory form of transforming public space, while offering a somewhat detached social experience familiar to consumers of social networking.¹⁴

¹³ Simon Kim, interview with Becky Huff Hunter, 2012. See also http://www.ikstudio.com/philadelphiamasque_images.

¹⁴ I covered this work in more detail in 'Philadelphia: Distributed Collectives,' *Art Papers*, November/December, 2011.

An APA commission, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Open Air* (2012) worked on a larger scale with the now-ubiquitous interweave of physical and virtual experiences in everyday life. Collected and analyzed via a free app, GPS and spoken signals from participants' mobile devices choreographed a display of long-range, evolving searchlight patterns projected from twenty-four robotic bulbs in Philadelphia's central museum district, visible within a ten-mile radius. A city-scale equivalent to the popular iTunes Visualizer, or the standard graphic equalizer on any stereo, its use of voices and light as media fluctuating between materiality and immateriality underscored the still equivocal status of our networked connections. The artist's democratic ambition to promote 'tolerance, participation, bottom-up control, and the sense of public agency'¹⁵ laudably echoes the ethos of the online commons, exemplified by websites like Wikipedia. However, only smartphone owners (less than 50% of US adults) could add their unique vocal imprint to the mix. In a city as economically polarized as Philadelphia, many were left merely to observe.

A common criticism of conventional site-specific practice is exactly this, that despite being outdoors - *in public* - it does not necessarily engage *the public*, or constituents most in need, in a helpful or lasting way. Despite each work's flaws, whether online, on the street, within museums, or a mix of all three, Philadelphia's artists and curators are working with social-specific forms of public art in order to effect change and engender meaningful participation. The City of Philadelphia is lending assistance to this endeavor through its Office of Arts, Culture and the Creative Economy, which for example commissioned the artist group FutureFarmers to facilitate *Soil Kitchen* (2011), a multifaceted project promoting healthy earth, food sharing and redefining a local landmark.

Not all art must be measurably useful, but producers of intentionally public art in any form do have responsibilities to the diverse groups of people that their work potentially reaches. Temple Contemporary, a program connected to Tyler School of Art, provides a final, excellent example of art

¹⁵ Association for Public Art [<http://associationforpublicart.org/open-air>].

that stretches to meet the public where it is most needed. The program's space hosts events and displays going in-depth on topics such as Philadelphia's failing school system, voting and the politics of incarceration, and provides services such as free bicycle overhauls, as well as celebrating forms of creativity - candy making, graphic design, baking - lying outside of the fine art corral. Temple Contemporary director Robert Blackson outlines the reasoning behind his mission, and the type of thinking that will propel the strongest forms of future public practice: 'Much public art discourse relies on architectural space to define what is and is not *public*. Such a polarity of inside/outside distracts from what are critical questions of creatively addressing urgent concerns of the public, in other words, re-imagining art's social function.'¹⁶

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¹⁶ Robert Blackson, interview with Becky Huff Hunter, 2012.