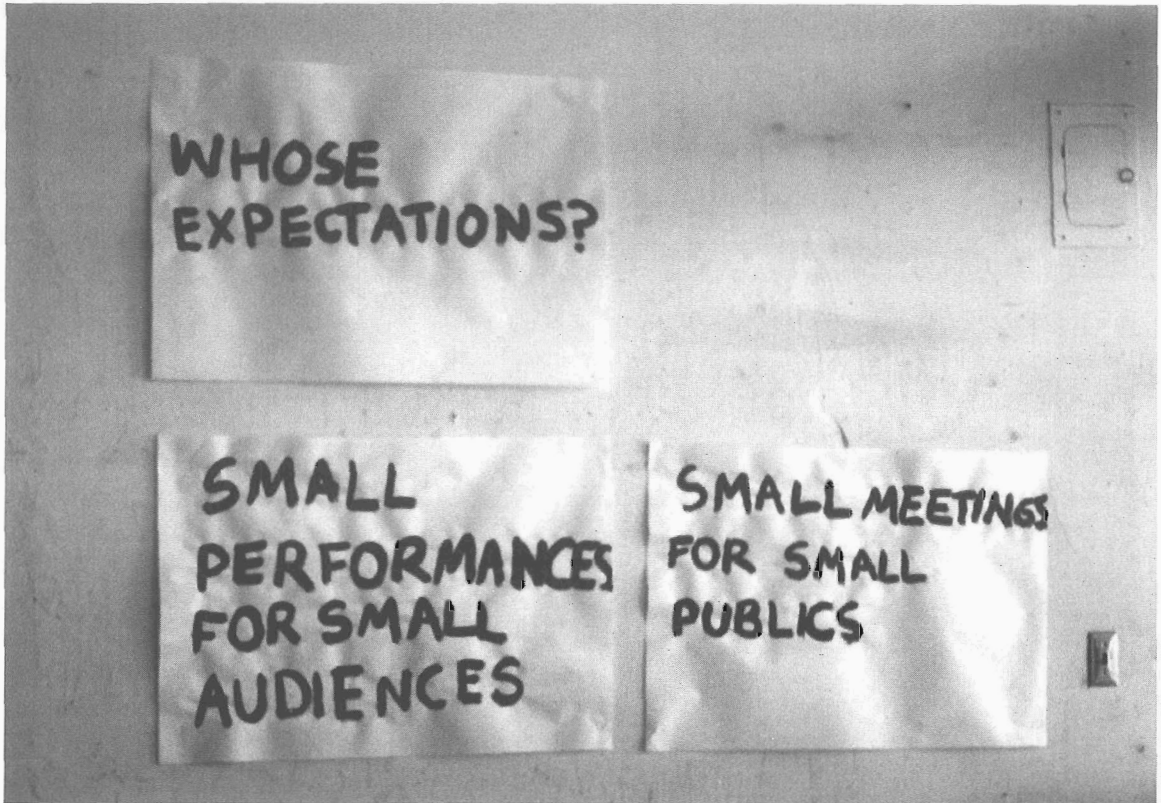


counterpublic

Kirsten Forkert



This project began with my renting a storefront at 692 East Hastings in Vancouver that would function both as studio and exhibition space, blurring the relationship between the two.

I had never had a studio space and produced mainly ephemeral site-specific performances. I was trying to challenge my own practice to see how it would function in a context I was unused to working in. I was also questioning the event-based nature of my practice, and the expectations events bring with them. I realized that before I could effectively do the work, I needed to create an audience/context and that it would be much more interesting to do the work in the context of other activities that would bring people together: meetings, screenings, or other artists' projects. Part of the work would be the creation of this context, and my work could exist in relation to other activities and practices. This parallels a shift elsewhere in my practice towards working collaboratively and creating performances wherein audiences participate very directly in the work. What has resulted is somewhere between an artist-run centre and an artist's collective.

The space is situated in a transitional neighbourhood: between Strathcona, formerly low income but now rapidly gentrifying, and the Downtown Eastside, the poorest neighbourhood in Canada. These tensions are an important part of what has taken place in the space, and what will hopefully take place in the future.

To date the project has involved:

- A text-based installation and a nine-hour "performance" that involved thinking, reading, and talking about what can be done in the current political climate,
- Collaboration with Sarah White, who organized an exhibition of drawings by Jorge Campos of practically everyone in the neighbourhood, some of whom are no longer alive,
- A reading group that meets every two weeks, to look at Antonio Negri's *Time for Revolution* and is concerned with time in relation to capitalism.

OTHER MODELS FOR TIME

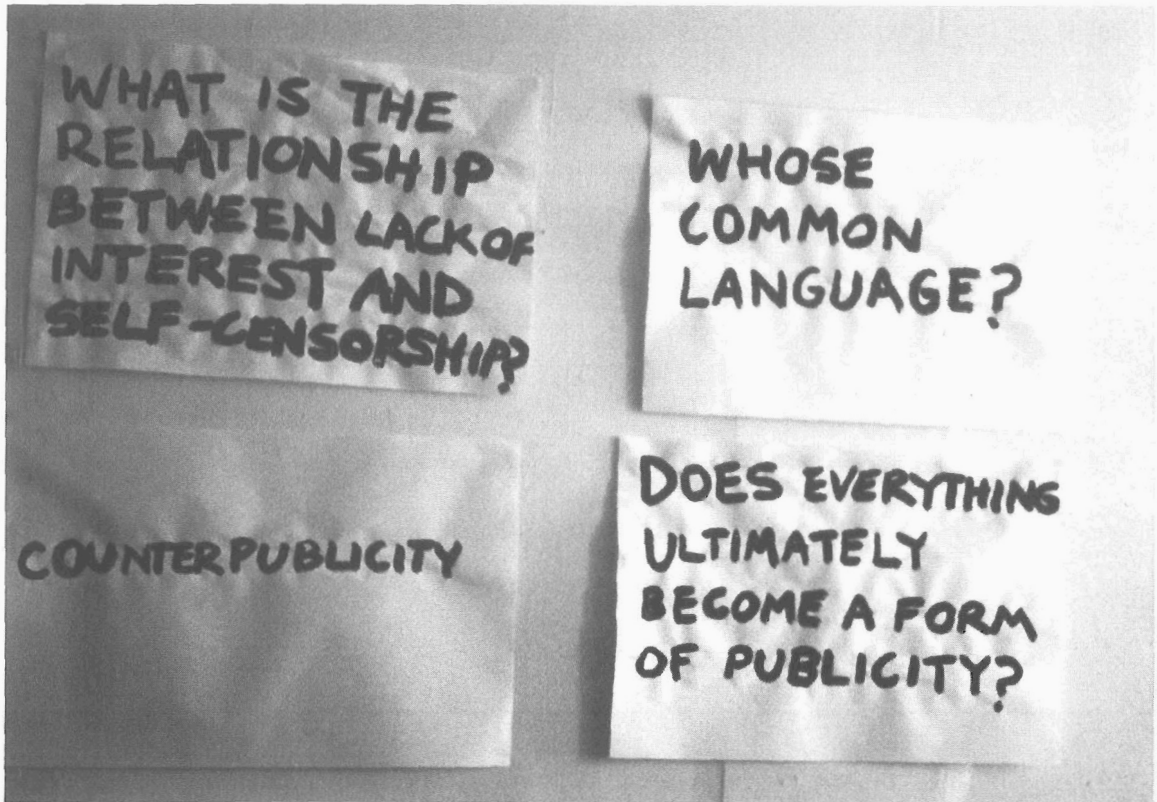
The local is a counter to market populism.

Is it more important for people to have a significant experience, or to reach lots of people? The former can be difficult to justify in a climate that's all about numbers, visible signs of popularity as an index of success, immediate rewards, immediate reassurance, everyone loves you, it's all good.

Is a project futile that doesn't reach a mass audience, or which doesn't have the weight of an institution and/or mass market machinery behind it? What does this requirement prevent, or even censor? What do we consider to be worth doing?

The claim that one can reach a mass audience is based on generalizations: that we're all white, male and middle class or at least think that way, and that we all speak the common language of North American pop culture. This is thinking in templates: that one model can be applied to many contexts, as in big box stores (and that anything that doesn't fit doesn't exist, or that differences between local contexts are there to be managed, as in the McDonald's new ad campaign, which translates "I'm lovin' it" into all the languages of the world). It is easy to mistake the familiarity of the brand name or the ease with which we slip into a consumer mode for a sense of community, or to confuse those low low prices with accessibility.

What are the challenges to face? The fact that everyone is so busy, not being able to meet, or only meeting in situations outside of the demands of economic survival or school or recreation/entertainment?



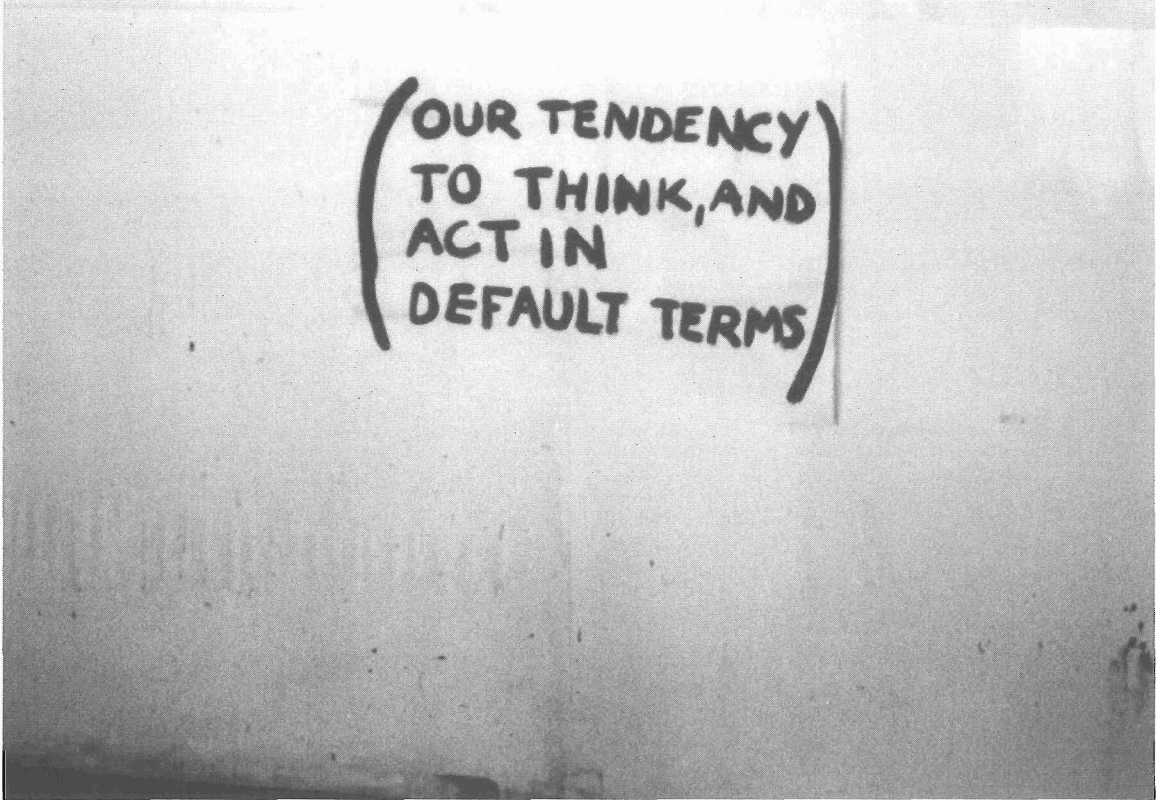
The more educational institutions become privatized and professionalized and the less financially accessible they become, the less they become about critical engagement and the more informal contexts (such as free schools or readings groups) start to fulfil this need. While these other contexts lack stability and are run on volunteer labour, they also tend to be based in everyday situations and struggles. Of course, this provokes the question of whether giving up on the academy as a model inadvertently replicates a logic of privatization (privatization as individuals taking on the responsibility that once belonged to the state).

Small audiences are not elitist; they are localized.

What a location can offer is an anchor and meeting point, and a way of creating social spaces. It's a focus, a grounding point, continuity.

How the space is used should never become habit, and it can intersect with older models (of say, the artist-run centre or community centre) but cannot adopt them by convenience and without question.

How much of the emphasis on dematerialization is part of current hype around the internationally mobile, cosmopolitan citizen who is independent from specific local contexts and who may have more in common with Paris or New York than the surrounding region? It could be argued that this is actually the ideal citizen under globalization: independent from local public infrastructure, and because of this not affected by cutbacks and privatization.



The problem occurs when alternative spaces or structures do not pose a direct challenge to, or departure from established economic or organizational models; the spaces/structures then become lower-budget versions of the institutions to which they ultimately aspire. Professionalization, self-promotion and bureaucracy are the default; doing something else takes a lot more work.

The question must be asked: what can a physical space offer in a climate where capital follows a fluid and dematerialized logic? Is using a physical space as a starting point somehow anachronistic?

Is it possible to engage with the local in the context of a globalized reality in ways that are not ultimately nostalgic (perhaps for a time when we were supposedly more connected to a sense of place or community)? Could we think of the local in terms of specific material conditions of the here and now (which are contingent, but which are also implicated in global flows and may in turn affect them) rather than emphasizing fixed ideas of identity or authentic experience? Is this easier said than done? Perhaps the local can remind us that things are not the same wherever we go, once you step outside the airport or the big box store.

Are dematerialization or ephemerality in themselves radical? How much do these qualities present us with new potential, and how much do they reflect the same values and hierarchies of the current power structure in a different form?