

Temporary Public Spaces

By Ashley Hunt

Published in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Protest*, issue 4, vol 1, 2005

I.

Intersection

The project I'm describing here began in 1998, with research into prison privatization. This subject came as an intersection of two lines within my previous work: exploring the relationship of political economy and identity formation on the one hand, and teaching art and media literacy to young people on the other, wherein I was witnessing a rapid criminalization of my students by local police and school administrators. The private prison had recently re-emerged from its historical prohibition, converting the repressive state apparatus of the prison—which functions in relation to capital accumulation—into a space of capital accumulation in itself,¹ and it seemed to link these two lines concretely. It illustrated a political economy that produces oppress-able subjects (through the desire it produces for more and more prisoners), which manifest in less abstract, juridical, spatial and interpersonal effects of racial and class domination.

Corrections

After experimentation with this research in gallery-based installations, the project came to partial fruition with the completion of a feature length documentary, *Corrections*, in 2001. Forged out of three years of conversations with grassroots communities and activists, with academic and policy “experts” and representatives of prison corporations and businesses, the documentary takes prison privatization as a starting point to analyze today’s awesome prison growth as it relates both literally and figuratively to contemporary racism and class domination. Because of this, it quickly found an audience among a range of anti-prison activism and community development work throughout the U.S., within which critical, less traditional propaganda tools were sorely needed.

Audience

One strategy in constructing the video had been to multiply its voice by alternating its modes of address, its language and arguments as they might speak to (or shape) a specific “audience,” so that different sections would appeal to different communities. This was intended to bring varied positions into the common space of its audience, wherein they might identify with one another. Within racially and economically diverse audiences, this strategy allowed for a negotiation of differing ideas about “crime” and imprisonment, while also provoking insight into the structures of privilege and subjection which separate these communities to begin with.

¹ The chief ways imprisonment has served capital accumulation historically are: A) helping divide the working class against itself via the ideology of criminality (distracting the working poor from class struggle by re-focusing their “struggle” onto securing their property from the non-working poor, or lumpen); and B) providing a slave-labor force on a factory, plantation or state building (public works) model. With *prison privatization* however, profit is achieved in conjunction with the workforce downsizing and mass joblessness of globalization, wherein the unemployed are warehoused (absorbing the threat of *surplus labor*) by companies who, in turn, accumulate tax revenue for use as finance capital.

Context

The completion of the video was, by itself, rather meaningless without its more thoughtful insertion into a public discourse and space. As its utilization spread among grassroots and activist groups, it attracted the interest of progressive funders, who in the process of supporting many of these same groups, wanted to bring the video further into their work in the form of public events. Few of the traditional spaces that open up for films and videos to live—from galleries and museums to film festivals, TV broadcast or theatrical release—extend the work beyond their own institutional discourses and consumption. Nowhere is this more true than for the communities most heavily targeted by the prison system, who if change was to come would need to be the agents of that change, and without whom change would most likely be unresponsive to their needs. What resulted was a national tour of the video along the contours of the growing U.S. anti-prison and prison reform movements (two distinct although overlapping sets of political work), where by inserting the video into specific sites—defined by their audience, context and pre-established public and private discourses—we might create something like a “temporary public space.”

II.

Precedent

Beginning in the 1920s, British sociologist turned filmmaker, John Grierson, helped generate public discourse around housing, labor conditions and industrialization with his films, which would become antecedents to the traditional western, social-documentary form. Around the same time, a “film train” was taken around rural regions of the Soviet Union by filmmakers, including Alexander Medvedkin and Dziga Vertov, functioning as a self-contained film factory: shooting, making and screening films in temporary, outdoor cinemas. Their intention was to help “proletarianize” peasant communities, both by evoking a class consciousness among them and making them feel a part of the larger historical project of which socialism was to be the beginning. In post-revolutionary Cuba, mobile film units duplicated this effort, not only to proletarianize but also to tackle the ingrained racism and sexism which they linked to the legacy of colonialism, while drawing lines of solidarity with other Third World liberation struggles. Throughout these and countless other examples, what distinguishes the efforts toward wide-ranging social change was their insistence to not simply provide propaganda to audiences, but to form audiences into a kind of public, one which might contribute to a larger public by sparking thought and discourse, building constituents for social movement.

III.

Community

Community may be formed from a commonality among people—familial, ethnic, geographic, etc—but as we know from language, identity is formed upon difference: to name something is not to say what it is, but to distinguish it from what it is not. By way of a common opposition, community moves across people horizontally, and articulates identity vertically. It can be temporary, instrumental or enduring; working from within a group to empower itself, or assigned from without to marginalize, claim or control it. Community is one way for people to group, a mode or template for organization, whereas groupings and organization form power (which is

why the technologies of established power tend to divide groups and disrupt any communal organizing that exceed its control). Community does not have to mean homogeneity. Enabling communication across a grouping of people, within which their common opposition to a larger power can be spoken and agreed to, can draw commonality across them—an identity as a path along which they might overcome a subjection, exclusion, or historical ways in which they'd been divided, racialized or gendered into antagonistic and alienated positions.

Site

As “site” and space have become more central problems for artists within recent decades, it is important to draw a distinction between the physicality of a space (its appearance, the formal qualities of a “built environment”) and the meaning of a space as it is constituted discursively (how that physicality is the expression of specific network of social relations: power, economy, racialization, gender, sexuality). As this concerns artists, one must ask not only how does a work “appear” in relation to the formal qualities of a built environment, but how does it relate to, participate or intervene in the discourses which make it as such?

Public

In order to examine the relationship of “public art” to the spaces and practices of democracy, Rosalyn Deutsche theorizes what “public” is, so that we might understand how such a space would be “public.” She recalls the writing of Claude Lefort, who defines the historical emergence of democracy as the “disappearance of certainty about the foundations of social life” (previous foundations having been religious, monarchical or otherwise totalizing, idealized, inflexible and static). Once faced with an “emptiness,” or a negative space where the previous foundations had lay, democracy is thereby the process in which a public (the presumable constituents of a democracy) negotiates what they think the new foundations should be (democracy not as the outcome, but as the negotiations themselves). Public space, it follows, would be the space where this takes place: “in the absence of foundation, the meaning and unity of the social is negotiated, at once put at risk.”

Exclusion

It is important however to buffer this important defining of public space, indeed how we consider a “public,” with the reality of political exclusion, itself being spatial. As Deutsche connects this definition with theories aimed at bringing previously excluded positions into the space of political representation (Mouffe and Laclau), they presume a common position of accessibility to this discursive, public space, or at least require the will of someone already included to listen. It does not address the structural mechanisms by which many subject positions, regardless of their representation symbolically, are functionally excluded from the space of politics, rendering their claims to rights, entitlement and political speech silent.² Such a space by itself does not therefore allow for nor respect the free and creative production of ideas among the excluded or oppressed, as they would need in order to be the theorists of their own freedom. It does not address the “relations of domination,” in Max Weber’s terms, which are normative so that “the public” cannot recognize them (indeed, they do not want to recognize them, as their concept of their own

² Aristotle describes the voices of slaves as equivalent to the noises of animals, as their voices do not constitute “speech” in its political function, where “speech” means (to simplify) a voice that has power.

freedom—linked to their material position and wealth—requires the continued exclusion and exploitation of these very groups).

Critique

So if such discourse cannot be “all inclusive,” nor can it recognize the interests of those it excludes, then what need to be theorized are the bringing together of the already existing discourses and analyses of the excluded into a space—indeed to form a space—from which new collective identities, communities as stated above, can emerge, and most importantly, can have effect. Central to this is the role of critique: a constant critique of power, identifying its (re)arrangements and technologies at each moment so that our definition of freedom (upon which any truly progressive action will depend) accurately imply liberation; a critique which lends itself to the production of new subjectivities which imply such liberation as its very expectation and desire.

Tools

There’s a quote by Martha Rosler, I don’t remember from where, but I’ll paraphrase it as:

The most important thing a work of art can hope to do is create a conversation between people in a room.

This quotation evokes an importantly different scale for politics than we might be accustomed to. It demands a more immediate, “organically” rooted proximity for one’s interventions, contestation and positioning.³ By suggesting “political” art can be not only a disruption or action, but a context, a space for politics, it implies a public space within the very discursive field of an artwork’s meaning production—in between the artist’s articulation of an audience and the spectator’s role in the production of meaning. Here, a public space can form within the act of interpretation, in the field of signification a work opens up, and for an audience not limited to established political segregations. This imagines an art that is not trying to intervene in politics, but which is inscribed into that very “political” realm that we typically assume to be distinct from “art” (as reflected in the separation of the two terms into “art and politics,” or “political art”). It imagines an artwork and context that have the potential to form a “temporary public space.”

Movement

If a temporary public space would include opening up a local political discourse and transmitting into that discourse those of other communities facing similar problems, could this contribute to the continuation of something like a “critical community”—community identities politicized around their local conditions, but in relation to a larger political struggle, connected through a radical analysis, built organically, as the constituents for social movement?

³ By “organic,” I am not referring to any idealized notion of something primary in origin, but to Gramsci’s use of the “organic intellectual,” as one who comes from within the group that is struggling for change.

IV.

Interview with Artist Sharon Hayes via Email

AH: First, can you explain generally the ideas of collectivity and “being in common” that you have been working with lately?

SH: Through my work in performance, grounded in the relationship of a speaker to a group of listeners, I have come to the question: can an audience serve as a model of collective activity? A number of people who individually and in small groups decide to attend an event, that decision necessarily places them in the position of being a larger group; they find themselves in common rather than in communion. I am not bothered by the so-called passivity of audience. For me, the position of audience is itself a space in which collective activity both happens and can happen; it is a site of actual and potential affiliation.

AH: Second, can you contextualize collectivity and “being in common” with regard to the content and politics of your subject matter?

SH: Lately, I have been investigating the present moment through a critical examination of various historical texts, including a speech from Patricia Hearst and the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA), sent to Hearst’s parents during her kidnapping in 1974. In the work, I partially memorize each of the four audio transcripts. In four separate performative situations, I give a contemporary audience the transcript of a tape, tell them I will speak the text and ask them to correct me when I am wrong. There follows a process of interpretation that is necessarily informed by the gap between two moments of enunciation: the original and the re-spoken or re-presented. While my work resists a nostalgic recollection of these speakings, there is always the phantom of an impression that the 60s and 70s are a now-lost moment of true collective action. But through their task of correction, they are distracted from their typical position of watching and instead, negotiate their own relation to their active remembering of history.

AH: Third, can you relate collectivity and “being in common” to the “spaces” in which your work exists, and by space, I certainly mean the specifics of a room, a gallery or sanctioned art space, but also other spaces, discursive or historical, the space of a larger community or culture outside the art world?

SH: As a partial answer to this question, I will say that my work is attentive to the particular spatial and institutional frames in which it is shown. This relates to the physical space itself, but also to the disciplinary practices and histories of various modes of cultural production which already pre-define certain bodies of audience. In my early days in the world of theatrically-based performance art, I was constantly asked, “Don’t you need to reach more people?” I don’t believe that more is better. I’m highly skeptical of the idea of a “mass” audience. I am more interested in viewing of a work that initiates a form of distribution, in which the work is passed along. Sometimes this is a literal passing, as in the case of the SLA piece, where the installation consists of multiple copies of the four video tapes generated by the re-speakings and a sign saying, “Please take, watch and pass along.” Other times it is a discursive passing, where an audience/viewer takes up, repeats and/or borrows from the work, moving it out and beyond itself, moving it into a larger discursive space where it may not be recognizable in its original form and where I may never know how it has participated in a larger discussion. Unlike advertising, mass media and certain forms of “popular” entertainment, this way of working presumes an audience to be intelligent, invested and dynamic; it demands a level of engagement but does not prescribe what form this engagement must take.

V.

Organizing

The first steps of the tour were outreach, researching the work in different communities and having conversations with those who were interested. We discussed how to create something beyond typical outreach events, something toward these models of a “temporary public space” and “critical community.”⁴ Throughout, what would come to characterize the tour’s overall dynamics and registers were the varied critiques implicit within each campaign: how the “publics” of each campaign were conceived of and produced; and as these publics made up the campaign’s constituency, to what extent the campaign goals were truly their own and how much or little they were trusted within the work by leadership. These differences would correspond rather neatly to the tensions and contradictions between anti-prison organizing and prison reform work as they exist in the U.S. today.

To oversimplify, prison reform work seeks primarily legalistic means to correct the ways in which the criminal justice system and its institutions appear to have “corrupted,” or become abusive against rights and bodies. At its heart are mostly liberal-humanist interpretations of civil rights, human rights and diversity, set within a general confidence that the system is good, as long as the ways in which it has “broken” get “fixed.”

At the heart of anti-prison work is a more systemic critique, challenging racism, monopoly capitalism and the state, of which prison crises are but one manifestation.⁵ Forming a growing movement, they generally see the state as complicit in (or instrumental to) structures of racial and class domination, incapable of offering anything to mitigate intra-personal harm and violence but more harm and violence, directed selectively at society’s expendable, exploited and excluded communities who “get out of line” (e.g. communities of color, workers, jobless, homeless, organizers and activists, and those whose lifestyles threaten the dominant social order). They are more connected with the broader goal of “penal abolition,” negotiating and theorizing what such a change in society would require and look like, and ensuring that all short term focused reform work be in line with this goal and a longer term, radical vision.

Private: A third field of existing prison work is the tendency to organize against private prisons, but private prisons alone, refusing to consider any larger critique of the “corrections” system or state prisons (let alone a larger social critique). This is because—as most anti-privatization activism comes from the public sector, from civil servants rejecting the privatization of their state jobs, payrolls and pensions—with prisons it comes from public sector prison guard unions. So although this work is collaborated on by a number of progressive organizations, it is funded, staffed and accountable primarily to law enforcement and the guard unions, who do not want to “correct,” reform or critique anything. On the contrary, their central analysis justifies their continued existence and expansion, largely a racially coded belief that the world is filled with irrational criminals and threats, and the ultimate role of the state is to eliminate them (one

⁴ I should say however, that the application of these terms is in retrospect. I didn’t approach organizers telling them “we must create ‘temporary public spaces!’” The imperative for each screening event was the campaign or activist work at hand, and my interest was always in how to frame such an imperative in terms of a larger political discussion among which prisons and criminalization were but one part.

⁵ Consider that many of those who participate in anti-prison work come from other arenas of struggle against racism, capitalism and state power, from older New Left groups who’ve now turned to advocating for their politically-imprisoned comrades, to welfare rights advocates and public school teachers who, having begun their work within public service, have since followed their clients and students into the criminal justice system.

might see this as a form of state utopianism in its totalitarian form: it envisions a state which, constituted of threats rather than rights and people, is a potentially perfect organism that can perfect life through violence and coercive social control).

Fear

It is along these three tendencies of current prison work that I offer the following three examples of collaborative screenings, the first one having been officially a “success,” but simultaneously the biggest failure. This campaign was connected with the last of these three tendencies, the anti-private prison campaigns, run primarily by law enforcement, already underway by the time I was invited.

The goal of this particular event would be to stop a new prison from being built outside Tampa, Florida. With the involvement of law enforcement however, stopping this prison was not intended to scale back new prison construction, nor to stem the proliferation of prisoners,⁶ but rather, to maintain them as the sole property and profit of the state. The strategy was to hold a town hall meeting at which Corrections would be shown, followed by a discussion of the issues as they would affect their community, in hopes of provoking strong and active local opposition (insistent, local opposition being the only way in which new prisons tend to ever get stopped). Hence, the aesthetic of prison expansion is invisibility: the miraculous appearance of a prison no one had mentioned overnight, as a fact, not a subject for debate).

It was upon my arrival to the town that I learned abruptly the extent to which a discourse could be codified in advance—framed and circumscribed in its possibilities and outcomes. In this case, it was how the prison guards had already set the terms for the discourse as a law and order debate through their outreach and advertising, with concern for escapes and hostage taking and murders in the town, as well as the family members of prisoners—“lord knows what kind of trouble that kind of people might bring to the town when visiting!” This meant that no matter what the character of the community’s disagreement with the prison plan, their opposition would be captured and articulated into a response to fear, the very engine for prison growth and criminalization. And if we understand the historical development of modern law enforcement—rooted in the maintenance of racial subordination and class warfare—then we know that this fear is indeed a racial fear.

Held in their local community center, the event was attended by almost 200 people (not counting the conspicuous spies from the private prison corporation in question, Cornell Industries). The community was fairly divided racially, but as in so much of rural America today, they shared a clear class commonality. The former economy of the town had been phosphorous mining, and now that that had dried up, those not too sick and asthmatic from the toxic mining were desperate for jobs. Not so ironically, at the center of the prison deal was the local phosphorous tycoon, whose now devalued land (of defunct phosphorous mines) stood to be re-valued if “re-developed” as a (toxic) home for prisoners.

Our presentation enraged the audience so that they took control of the meeting and, by its end, had mobilized a community board to stop the prison, which within a month or so had done just that. This is of course good for the community in that they weren’t subjected to a parasitic, local treasury draining prison, and as a testament to what local folks who individually lack power can accomplish when organized. But since this organization was mobilized as a spectacular response to a racial and class-based fear, the identity they produced remained fearfully subordinate to a law and order movement that is simultaneously locking them down, policing their joblessness and criminalizing their poverty.

⁶ Note that the “demand” for private prisons is in response to the prison overcrowding that began in the 1970s and ‘80s.

Trust

This second case was quite involved, including the production of two Footnote videos.⁷ Here the goal was to close down an existing prison, a juvenile prison in Louisiana, which by all accounts was one of the most violent in the country. But whereas the voice of prisoners and their families had been excluded from the discourse a priori in Florida, this campaign was to be led by the young prisoners' parents and community members, who were becoming politicized by the rampant abuse of their children. Behind the parents, however, funding and coordinating the work, stood an incredibly skillful legal advocacy group who operate on a legalistic, reformist basis. Within the questions being asked in this recollection, the challenge for this campaign would be how, within this structure, the communities' needs for a greater, more radical social change—of which fighting their children's criminalization is only an initial step—would be regarded and allowed to manifest within the campaign's vision, demands, and results. Presumably, this would mean not simply closing down a “bad” prison or “fixing” it, but a more radical formulation of a freedom (beginning with freedom) which could then become a constitutive element of the community's larger political identity, its discursive and political organization.

The first step was to document a protest put on by the parents and legal advocates, in the form of a symbolic Jazz Funeral, “mourning the dead and dying dreams of their children.”⁸ This was made into a video we would show along with Corrections at a series of statewide screenings, intended to build grassroots constituency for the campaign.

These screenings were held in community centers and churches, and included short presentations by community leaders, parents, lawyers, and at one event, an allied state senator. The value of each event seemed again to be in how the space was constructed in its audience and potential for dialogue. Some events had very limited public conversation, mostly “experts” speaking “at” a larger audience, which seemed to leave the community frustrated and disconnected, subjected only to the “official” analysis. Other smaller events were almost entirely structured around dialogue, drawing much more valuably upon community members' experiences and needs, where the community could meet and get to know one another, share their stories, and using that as a way to develop them into activists.

Finally, I was invited to document a series of legislative hearings at which the parents could confront the state legislature with their children's horrific stories (“speaking truth to power” as it were). I was able to follow the preparations, how the parents were given fairly sophisticated media training so as to contend with media attacks, neutralization and spin, and to be as effective in their position as possible with regard to closing the prison. The interesting thing about the hearings was to witness the state's own discursive formation, its framing or territorialization of the space set out for “hearing” the public, which by all measures would reveal itself as set up to capture and contain speech; to disarm the effect speech is to be endowed with politically; to neutralize and subordinate it. This was similar to the Florida screening, to the guards' union setting out the terms for the discourse through their advertising, but here it was through the physical and discursive construction of the room that articulated the citizens as outsiders, guests or interlopers, rather than as “owners” of this public space calling their public servants to task. One can recall Foucault's analysis of the symbolic organization of a courtroom, how its spatial

⁷ *Footnotes on Corrections* are a series of videos that I'd produced after *Corrections*, following specific campaigns or focusing on other specific issues. This campaign included, *New Orleans Jazz Funeral* (2001) and *Close Tallulah Now!* (2002).

⁸ The Jazz Funeral is a Mardi Gras type parade, which as an African Diasporic tradition that survived the Middle Passage and the cultural suffocation of U.S. slavery and apartheid, seemed a form of protest whose connection to history spoke to a more profound resistance than do typical forms of activism.

arrangement enforces hierarchy and authority so that the citizen (in Foucault's formulation, the criminal suspect) is always already "guilty," addressed as "criminal."

The involvement of the parents however, their fearless and indignant testimonies in front of a mostly hostile and disinterested legislature,⁹ the busloads of community folks and school children spilling out of the hearing rooms (they had to add an overflow room with a TV hook-up), their militant attitude which refused subordination—an excess of a signified "people"—ruptured the order of this hierarchy, thereby undermining the state's authority and credibility as the sole narrator of the prison's character (which according to them had little to no problems at all). This positioned the state politically so as to have to respond, although whether the communities themselves would be allowed to participate in this response, and what that response would be remained an open question.

Instead of finding this out however, or perhaps this was the state's answer, a news story emerged from what was in all likelihood a backroom, good-old-boy conspiracy that laid bare the collusive relationship between criminalization, prison building and investment capital: the insurer for the bond that had financed the prison balked at its shut-down (which would mean a default on the remaining debt), after which Standards and Poors wrote a letter threatening to downgrade the state's credit rating if it did so. Suddenly, with the state's credit rating in jeopardy, the legislators were let off the hook from having to respond at all.

This disappointment brought the hearings to an end, but the video we made subsequently—whose storyline concludes with this manipulation of public process—was used the following year in another round of statewide screenings, which in that year's hearings, lead finally to a mixed-blessing victory. This victory involved a promise to shut down the prison within a few years, but was absent any commitment to de-carcerate, to challenge the advancing criminalization of Louisiana's youth, or even slightly suggest that the crisis is part of an historical continuity of structural racism and class subordination.

What became quite clear—and it turned out that no one knew this better than the parents—is that they were in the end being used symbolically, as signifiers of a constituency in a performance before the state and the media. And while this strategy did indeed "work," due largely to the strength of these parents, the critique of power and vision of freedom which were privileged in the process failed to correspond meaningfully to the larger field of domination to which these communities were and remain subjected. There was the acting out of democracy and reform was achieved. Despite the parents' own knowledge of their conditions however, the public spaces we tried to open up did not belong to them enough and did not allow them to communicate that knowledge into a politic. Their voices were allowed to enter and circulate, they were allowed to play scripted roles based upon the protocols presumed effective by the campaign leaders, but they were never themselves trusted to lead, to know what their communities needed better than the "experts." The privileged language was the specialized language of the policy makers and legalists, that which would please and stroke the egos of the legislators, from which any other language was marginalized, and the outcome reflected this.¹⁰

⁹ I am using the term "fearless" self consciously so as to refer to Foucault's formulation of fearless speech, or *parrhesia*, in which a subject talks back to power at the risk of danger to itself.

¹⁰ Of particular interest is the exclusion of any connection being drawn from these exploited youth to adult prisoners, as well as the stifling of one legal staffer's attempt to introduce special support to gay and lesbian youth within the prisons, as both of these would offend the presiding legislators. To the credit of the legalists however, and the larger quandary for us, is that without such "stroking of the legislators," the deal to shut down the prison would never have been reached. But our question is not whether they "did the right thing," but rather, why such work is conceived in such a way as to come at the expense of further marginalizing and maligning other dominated subjectivities. Additionally, and for another discussion, is what has happened subsequently, wherein the parents' group has claimed its autonomy and has begun advocating on a broader level, including campaigning to have the emptied prison converted into a community college.

Open

The third was altogether different, set solidly within anti-prison organizing. This work was part of an ongoing national campaign whose goal is grassroots organizing and movement building in itself, using prison issues as the common thread along which to draw a larger radical movement. What made this work the most simple for me was that, while much of this group's work manifests in individual, reform efforts around the U.S., the foundation of their organizing begins on the discursive level. Their primary work has been to hold regional conferences for thousands of grassroots activists at a time, which, similar to the public spaces I've been trying to describe, foster an "organic" discourse among the people most affected by this system, wherein a radical critique draws on the needs of the participants, prioritizing the voices of prisoners, former prisoners and prisoners' family members within their leadership and decision making.

I was asked to participate in the outreach for their upcoming conference in the South by collaborating on a series of screenings and organizing events. I traveled with the main conference organizer, Melissa Burch, on three separate driving tours, setting up events in conjunction with local groups across eleven states. Through an open structure in which we positioned ourselves as having as much to learn from the audiences as they from us, we would screen *Corrections* (and sometimes one or two of the Footnotes), and follow with a discussion of their local issues, connecting them with the themes of *Corrections*, the isolation of so many other communities who are facing the same circumstances and sense of powerlessness, and emphasizing the need for space for dialogue between them.

While presenting in public libraries, community colleges, churches, bookstores, community centers, after-school programs, alternative high schools and the offices of advocacy and activist groups, we learned of economic development and living wage issues, domestic violence, mental illness, illiteracy, queer rights advocacy and indigenous rights. We met with youth based groups, anti-racist organizers, unions, religious based and community development groups; with groups fighting police brutality, the death penalty, homelessness, and the destruction of public housing, health and welfare.

We discussed how all of these issues find expression—even if indirectly—in the prison system, from where one can map a complex critique of power and domination, one which follows the lines of these various forms of subjugation—which operate sympathetically within differentiated spheres of social life—from their common convergence in the prison outward. Importantly, such a "map" paints a much more instructive and useful analysis of the prison industrial complex than one that only maps only the industrial and commercial interests invested in prison expansion or isolated cases of corruption and abuse. It demands instead a radical critique open to and responsible to the experiences, expertise and local discourses of those who, excluded from the sphere of political representation, already resist in their daily lives, as a mode of living rather than a choice of activism and political engagement. The end result was a conference which brought countless advocates, activists and everyday folks into a network of identification, separated by geography but connected through discourse, which a glue or foundation for the beginnings of a larger movement.

VI.

Notes on a discussion with Melissa Burch over lunch, Downtown Los Angeles

Reflecting on the utility of the screening events.

Melissa and I agree on “event” as creating a space for a dialogue—both inside and outside the event (Melissa describes outside as being the dialogue as it is extended out into the larger discourse of the community).

Melissa states that there’s an important difference between: 1) an event that’s productive for (or that is) organizing; and 2) an event as “entertainment” attended by activists. She claims that many of the events she’s been to lately don’t really have a connection to organizing or some kind of political work, but are just about getting people to show up for something. An event should be connected to organizing in some way, whether it’s a campaign or an ongoing dialogue that will resume later.

Melissa says the starting point for an event should be “equalizing.” She states:

People bring all the shit they’re dealing with and what they know, but from different positions within a hierarchy, where different levels of value are assigned to their knowledge accordingly. People already know that it’s all People of Color who are getting locked up, but they often feel it’s not valid to speak from their own experience, they assume there’s an “official knowledge,” whereas “grassroots knowledge” isn’t valid enough to qualify you to speak.

She continues to explain that when using Corrections, the video privileges and confirms their experience, it “equalizes” to where they feel they can respond in this context of a meeting or whatever it is; it helps extend to everyone the “right to talk and comment on the issues.” She continues:

It sets the terms of the debate, we’re all agreeing to treat this as legitimate—where people’s opinions become part of that discussion’s official knowledge.

On another question, Melissa explains that the dialogue of the event contributes to “political education,” which is essential, not just in building struggle (smart activists), but to the overall process of social change:

...then you take that knowledge out into the world and you have the tool with which to discuss it.

I ask if that education is for building a larger, cultural counter-hegemony, or just for building a constituency for their organization’s own specific work and campaigns?

Both — they kind of flow from one into the other. Political education is necessary to activate people, who will then take up a struggle, or connect their day-to-day struggle to one with a political identity, which in the immediate is your organizing effort; but it’s ultimately essential that the larger cultural opinions and social consciousness change.

What’s the relationship of “dialogue” to “action?”

Dialogue has value in itself, as an act of democracy—if people have a conversation critically about something then they’re a step closer to movement on it. That’s why it is important that the community be validated in their “voice,” and that the event be connected to organizing.

VII.

The revolution used to have to compromise with capital and with power, just as the church had to come to terms with the modern world. Thus, the motto that has guided the strategy of progressivism during the march toward its coming to power slowly took shape: one has to yield to everything, one has to reconcile everything with its opposite, intelligence with television and advertisement, the working class with capital, freedom of speech with the state of the spectacle, the environment with industrial development, science with opinion, democracy with the electoral machine, bad conscience and abjuration with memory and loyalty...

...Today one can see what such a strategy has led to. The left has actively collaborated in setting up in every field the instruments and terms of agreement that the right, once in power, will just need to apply and develop so as to achieve its own goals without difficulty.

— Giorgio Agamben, *In This Exile (Italian Diary, 1992–94)*

There could hardly be a more relevant moment than now from which to view this problem announced by Agamben, a moment that could well become one of those looked back upon in wonderment, as to why we didn't recognize the patterns, the writing on the walls, the horrors to come. What I've tried to discuss here are differing effects of collaboration with political work that attempt, on one hand, to reform "the system," and on the other, to oppose radically the fundamental relations that constitute that system. Rather than considering them only as two "steps in the same direction," their differences with regard to power, community, critique and possibility must also be considered if we accept this historical danger that Agamben ascribes to "compromis[ing] with capital and power."

As reform work requires such compromise, today's collapse of progressive values and the continuing rightward slide of the U.S. political establishment (and others Globally) multiplies greatly the chances of such danger. For at the heart of this danger is an agreement to the vocabularies and analyses of the new Right, a hegemony concocted over the last forty years within capitalist and militarist (and now carceral and security-industrial) institutions and think tanks, and disseminated through a media increasingly consolidated in the hands of these same interests. Aimed at unmooring whatever remnants of rights and forms of public power stand in the way of unfettered accumulation, geopolitical dominance and resource monopoly, this hegemony works to spread the social hierarchies and relationships of domination that make such a pursuit possible, doing so by articulating an order to the world that makes its hierarchy seem natural, while obliterating the channels for communication that would allow us to object or contest. Despite the urgency of many short-term gains we continue to make in this campaign or that election, how do we know which compromises do not agree to this hierarchy and order? How do we know which compromises are steps in the correct direction? How much of this compromise makes one thing better, remains incapable of actually contradicting the larger order and its next plans, for what feel like immediate victories are nonetheless stripped of the political or discursive space necessary for the construction meaningful opposition and resistance.

Everywhere is the evidence of continued devastation and oppression, but especially since the end of the Cold War, the languages built to describe them, those of the Left, those of democratic movements and liberation struggles alike, have been marginalized to rarified spaces—specialized intellectual circles, institutionalized cultural discourse and shrinking union halls—outside of which they appear foundationless, ridiculous and dogmatic, historic at best despite their importance and increasing relevance. A testament to this would not be the new Right's cynical appropriation of "lefty-ish" language in order to peddle environmental, social, political destruction, and war, but that, as they use it, "the people" cannot apparently tell the difference.

What is missing is not the proliferation of evidence, but rather the interpretative frameworks that can germinate and grow what that evidence might tell us through a functional, non-specialized public discourse. This requires not only dissemination and "media reform," but

the spaces to allow such frameworks to develop organically in the first place, prioritizing the inclusion of those communities whose historical exclusion has allowed our conception of the “public” to be distorted. This cannot take place only within the institutions already the domain of a comfortable and privileged Left who, despite their insult at today’s conditions, remain comfortable in life. It must also take place at the epicenters of domination and borders of inclusion/exclusion, so that the ways people suffer today, how they are excluded, dominated and exploited and to what ends, can be spoken and heard in a way that has political meaning and effect; where they can be respected in their heterogeneity and difference, but also brought “in common” by way of their common opposition to the current hierarchies.

It is from here that new politics must develop (indeed, they are already underway), and this concept of “temporary public spaces” as I’ve presented it here has been one attempt, as an artist and cultural producer, to make space for it and with it, to take seriously this space from which we might begin to see reconfigured, critical articulations of political freedom and new subjectivities who will expect this freedom as their right, possibility and norm.