

New Trends in Bay Area Public Art

by David Buuck

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The legacy of the Situationists, with their emphasis on urban exploration, critical aesthetics, and collaborative "play," has influenced many local art practices, especially those focused on the *derive* ("drift") and psychogeography, two methods aimed at pushing citizens out of our everyday understandings of urban life. Merging surrealist art practices with Marxist sociology and urban critique, the Situationists and their followers aimed to break down the boundaries between art and life, as well as promoting a more radical appreciation of the matrices of power fundamental to the modern urban landscape. Today's post-industrial American city, sanitized by security and surveillance in the post-Guiliani, post-9/11 era, has become increasingly designed for the tourist's gaze, the weekender's wallet, the shopper's safe haven. If San Francisco has yet to become a complete mall, or reduced to a single codified "49-mile scenic tour," it is in part thanks to the long tradition of urban activists and artists who have continued to stage interventions in the public sphere, from ecstatically carnivalesque political protests to fly-by-night events such as parking-lot cinema, billboard reclamations, or street theater.

Some of the most consistently compelling programming in the Bay Area this last year has come out of Southern Exposure's year-long "Off-Site" project. Originally developed as a stop-gap response to having lost its gallery space for a year (due to retrofitting), SoEx met the challenge of being "homeless" by initiating a series of projects that extended its community-based programming into new and fruitful territories. Temporarily located at a Mission-based "headquarters," SoEx's Off-Site programs challenged arts audiences to become active participants in various adventures, be they touristic, performative, or site-specific. Ledia Carroll excavated buried urban histories with the "Mission Lake Project," while Christian Noid explored "bio-mapping" as a new form of interactive emotional cartography. Lee Walton, Glowlab, and Rebar all challenged audience members to become participants in urban life, while Neighborhood Public Radio charted the local airwaves with field recordings and conceptual audio projects. One of the highlights of Off-Sites was Jeannene Przyblyski's "Comings and Goings," a multi-media tour of Land's End in San Francisco, which included a beautiful guidebook, audio podcast, and interactive tour, each combining found texts, archival photos and audio, conceptual writing and historical research, all geared towards an experience of site that was both historical and conceptual, an act of aesthetic time-travel that activated all the senses. Przyblyski, who runs the Bureau of Urban Secrets, also worked with the National Park Conservancy to find new ways of engaging a site that might otherwise have become fully colonized within a conventional touristic gaze.

Several other local artists have engaged the San Francisco bay area by means of walking, (de)touring, and direct participatory engagement. Perhaps to counter the increasingly digitized nature of local culture, when it seems possible to get one's daily cultural "fill" by staying in and going online, these newer public practices tap into that desire for community, and for shared public sphere experience. Mundane Journeys, an ongoing

project developed by Kate Pocrass, invites users to call a hotline each week to get directions to a local "mundane" site, where half the fun (and half the "art") is the simple act of getting there, and being directed towards some heretofore unknown "find" in the city. Trevor Paglen, a Berkeley-based geographer, takes interested viewers on "tours" of US military "black-op sites," "carceral landscapes," and other conceptual-but-very-real zones of geography that are increasingly geared towards the military-industrial complex. Students and faculty in the California College of the Arts' Curatorial Practices and Social Practice programs have initiated several innovative projects that intersect the divisions between art, exhibition, activism, gallery, and site-specificity.

As befitting a region at the forefront of green movements and innovations, several other local artists have pursued ecological interventions as a fruitful new notion of public art. Amy Balkin's "Public Smog" and "This is the Public Domain" projects both use the logics, laws, and discourses surrounding public space, privatized space, and the environment to engage new sites of public space for art (such as the atmosphere). Balkin also collaborated with Kim Stringfellow, Tim Halbur, and others on "Invisible-5," a stunningly original audio tour of environmental justice sites and struggles along the I-5 highway between San Francisco and Los Angeles. Another local Amy, the SECA-award winning Amy Franceschini, has expanded her Future Farmers operation into "Victory Gardens," a playful yet timely intervention in the organic gardens/slow food movement. Similarly, Pond, though no longer a gallery, has continued its innovative programming in the bay, with one ongoing highlight being Natalie Jeremijenko's "OneTrees Project," where one hundred cloned trees were planted around San Francisco, a public art project that highlighted how new developments in biotechnology interact with local ecologies and microclimates.

Other local public programming combines the touristic with the historical, as journeys through the urban become mobile lectures, site-specific time-travel, or ecological mappings. Counterpulse, a relatively new arts and performance space in San Francisco, hosts the Bicycle History Tours, as well as Nature in the City events. The San Francisco Arts Commission's Art on Market Street program not only brings public art to kiosks on Market Street (as well as storefront window displays near Civic Center), but also sponsors public tours of the civic art projects, each designed to interact with local history and culture. Other similar endeavors run the gamut from the Haight Street ghost tours to more conceptual projects like Flash-Dance (the roving flash-mob instant street party) or Rebar's "Napping" (a midday nap in downtown "public" space). Where one might draw the line between "public art" and the "merely" touristic or escapist is up for debate; regardless, such practices help democratize the public sphere by engaging such debates in actual practice, in real time and space.

Outside of, or at least peripheral to, the more art-institutional-connected projects described above are the several local groups that tend to organize themselves around more community-based notions such as the tribe or club or affinity group. These include various photography groups that meet to explore certain out-of-the-way sites, or to 'drift' through an urban zone, looking for the aesthetic in the vernacular landscapes of the city. Likewise, urban spelunkers might meet up to explore the Bay Area's underground tunnels

and waterways, just as cinemaphiles organize on-the-fly public screenings on the undersides of bridges or the brick facades of de-industrialized zones. Internet culture in the bay area has obviously contributed to the social networking impulse, so that artists can find each other within very specific interest areas, just as the DIY community ethic often makes self-organized public art practices and collaborations more practical than working within the museum or gallery system. At the same time, such "tribe"-based networks blur lines between critical urban artistic practice and a more casual "vibe" of like-minded friends getting together to do something fun in the city. Most such groups leave little trace beyond a blogpost or digital photo archive, though sites such as the Albany Bulb landfill do serve as a public, outdoor gallery of its anonymous artists' ongoing endeavors with wonderful junk-sculpture and allegorical painting. Likewise, we must consider vernacular forms of art such as graffiti, car and bike "pimping" and other forms of "street art" as equally vital forms of public art, even if they are not often recognized as such. Indeed, the reclamation of increasingly privatized urban space by taggers, bombers, stencil artists and the like make the strongest argument for a vibrant public sphere of civic art, even as it must constantly battle for recognition against the forces of so-called "urban renewal."

One nagging challenge for many of the above-mentioned practices is how to document and archive such unconventional projects. Even those artists "hosted" by arts institutions run up against this challenge, as any visitor to one of Yerba Buena's exhibits on local arts groups has no doubt learned; as exciting as several of these projects "sound," reading about them in a gallery space is far less interesting than actually participating. Still, as with conceptual art and other such traditions, artists and curators have endeavored to find ways to make such works "last" beyond the often time-dependent nature of the "actual" events. Mundane Journeys, for instance, has produced a couple of wonderful little guidebooks and maps, while the Bureau of Urban Secrets has put out booklets as well as "Urban Essence," a fragrance designed to "smell like San Francisco." Zines, chapbooks, posters, and other ephemera typify the kinds of DIY productions often associated with such efforts. Yerba Buena Center's ongoing attention to local arts organizations has also been notably exceptional in this regard, producing several affordable booklets and products that encourage audience members to leave the museum and activate such projects in their daily lives.

Of course, this being San Francisco, the internet has become the primary archival site for public art projects. One advantage of online archiving is that the shelf-life of a project can be much longer than a conventional gallery or museum exhibit. This allows interested viewers to explore not only the archives of certain projects and events, but in many cases, to visit the actual sites of various tours, mappings, etc., and explore them on their own time. (For example, the Center for Land Use and Interpretation's map of oddball Bay Area sites is still a useful location for off-the-map tours of the San Francisco environs.) The new group Nonsite Collective, a group of writers, critics, artists and archivists, is working on ongoing collaborative wikis and archiving of their activities from the outset, exploring the very terms of the site/nonsite dialectics articulated by Robert Smithson in the 1960s, wherein the aesthetics and context of a project's display and recording are just as critical as the "content" itself to temporary public art works.

Projects like the Victory Gardens or One-Trees, on the other hand, are "archived" in a kind of ecological permanence, in the sense that such site-specific interventions are designed to literally take root and grow in their environs. To begin to think of urban ecology as an archive of aesthetic actions is but one compelling outcome of the more environmentalist endeavors discussed here. All in all, these examples (of a much larger repertoire of new practices) demonstrate that the urban continues to be a rich site for artistic and activist engagement.