

# Affiliated Practices and Aesthetic Interventions: Remaking Public Spaces in Cincinnati and Los Angeles

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The work discussed here and the theory that drives it are produced out of the intersection of a social practice of architecture, Marxism/aesthetics discourse, experiments within the context of urban social movements, and a guiding approach that places globalization within the operations of imperialism. One element of our work, on which this paper focuses, has been our ongoing interest in how architecture, and aesthetic interventions generally, might be transformed from hegemonic to counterhegemonic in order to realign political forces in the production of culture and social life. We assert our dedication to a critical, strategic and affiliated practice of architecture that tries to reorient subjectivities and affirm the oppositional cultures of social movements. Motivated by the will to root political theorizing as well as the practice of art-making within the history of culture and community – not the academy – our desire is to actually make something in the social world.

What social world are we talking about? We are talking about local struggles of social movements situated in a global force field of power relationships. In this world, “. . . localization or, more strongly, fragmentation is an inevitable condition of globalization, while globalization informs such fragmentation and serves as a reference for its articulation” (Dirlik, 2000, 6). As shorthand for our presentation here, let us clarify that the social movements with which we work are anti-racist struggles of the low-wage and no-wage working class, comprised predominantly of people of color oppressed as minority nationalities in the United States:<sup>1</sup> in Los Angeles we are looking at a civil rights struggle for equity in transportation and in the distribution of public resources (Mann, 2001); in Cincinnati, we look at a community-based struggle for housing that fights against the racism inherent in privatization and gentrification.

Our practice takes place on the battlefield of space, the space of the city. We see the city as a stage on which space is socially produced; the production of space and the construction of its meaning are subject to struggles over its control. The physical-mental-social space of the city is necessarily a contested terrain in which learning takes place in accumulated fragments of lived experience.

In the 1983 essay “The Ideological Analysis of Space” Fredric Jameson, drawing from the work of Henri Lefebvre, articulated important theoretical ground for us: “the principle vehicle and dimension of cultural revolution, the fundamental area in which a new mode of production secures its superstructures and retrains its subjects is to be seen as that of the transformation of space itself, the production of new types of space, which did not exist in the previous mode of production” (Jameson, 1983). Jameson analyzed the spatial characteristics of what he called “postmodernism,” later, “globalization,” (Jameson, 1998b) as “the cultural logic of late capitalism,” a logic of fragmentation and disorientation of human lived experience coincident with the system of global economic integration we call imperialism.<sup>2</sup>

Imperialism is the term we reserve for the late (moribund) stage of capitalism as a global economic system when it is most far-reaching but most in crisis. Under imperialism, the destruction, disintegration, decentering of a prior European universality is real; yet this process occurs simultaneous to the forced homogenizing, hegemonizing of economy and ideology that are the side-effects of an economic system in a struggle for survival. Taken together this fragmentation and unification give a picture of the persistent social totality that is obscured wherever possible, then revealed as a social space when the global crisis

explodes, such as, at the time of this writing, the “war” of Bush against bin Laden. Elsewhere we have critiqued the notion that the “post-socialist” globe lacks a social totality and questioned what this means for our present period: “It may be that in a historic period of *bourgeois hegemony-by-disorientation*, a pedagogical practice of *reorientation* would be a subversive act. How might this reorientation, this problem of generating new structures for knowledge of architecture in contemporary society, be formulated?” (Dutton/Mann, 1996, 20; Dutton, 1991, xv-xxix); Mann, 1990, 212-223)

While Jameson’s own work entails primarily analysis of these conditions, he calls for political interventions, as does Lefebvre. He went on to argue that “the union of a cultural politics and a politics of everyday life is to be found in the crucial domain of space and of a revolutionary transformation of that space.” And later in a piece specifically written for an architectural audience he stated “counter-hegemony means producing and keeping alive a certain alternate ‘idea’ of space – of urban daily life” (Jameson 1985, 72).

Within this dialectic between fragmentation and unification and the constantly-changing contest over its meaning, our project is to affiliate with social movements for which aesthetic interventions might prove to be powerful tactics for ideological reorientation and for an actual redistribution of power in the urban landscape – that is, for producing an alternate idea of space. Too often in architectural discourse a conflation of space and its political content misguides architectural theorists to assume that a radical aesthetic transformation of space leads automatically to a transformed politics. We try to work the other way around, where counter-hegemonic meanings, nurtured within social movements, are extended in a spatial practice.

Since we intentionally place art-making within a strategy for social change, we approach our practice of aesthetic intervention as both explicitly affiliated and consciously pedagogical. We accept Antonio Gramsci’s assertion that “every relationship of ‘hegemony’ is necessarily an educational relationship” (Gramsci, 1997 350). We believe that if intellectuals and social movements take seriously the processes of popular consent to the hegemony of the dominant culture industry, then the matter becomes pedagogical.

Accordingly, our work negotiates that line between pedagogical work and aesthetic practice. The kinds of questions we confront are: What learning opportunities can be created by aesthetic interventions by social movements? What is their critical potential? What role can cultural production play in helping movements for change develop their political strategy and achieve their tactical aims? How are local collective acts of articulation in time and space situated within the contradictions of globalization, that is, within the simultaneous processes of differentiation and integration?

Challenged by these questions, we locate our work within a tradition of “agit-prop” as it has evolved historically within revolutionary movements to reorient consciousness in the face of radical, rapid, often-incomprehensible change. Historically, the conjunction of the twin tactics of “agitation” and “propaganda” was brought into use by artists in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 as a socialist mode of production was coming into being and a “new socialist man” was being imagined (Mann, 1996, 263). The vitality of this expression has for us the added benefit of being a designation used for cultural products, i.e., agit-train, agit-boat, in other words, agit-props that could travel from one place to another and, through active repetition, recycling and reformation, take on ever-enriching and changing meanings and generate an imaginary space as well as a physical one.<sup>3</sup> Agit-trains, which traveled the Russian countryside enacting a Living Newspaper devised to recreate, or create for the first time, political exposures, situated the lived experience of individuals within a new social totality under socialism. We draw from the root words – agitation and propaganda – their pedagogical role. Agit-prop was the living embodiment in an aesthetic production of the theoretical, propagandist, agitational, and organizing work that, taken together, create what V.I. Lenin called “comprehensive political exposures” (Lenin, 1947).

A core principle of Lenin’s political theory is for us a pedagogical theory: “comprehensive political exposures are an essential and *fundamental* condition for training the masses in revolutionary activity” (Lenin, 1947, 70). The challenge is to create opportunities for people in the course of struggle to share experiences that expose how the political system works and where they are situated within it. Following Marx’s maxim that social being creates social consciousness, Lenin makes it the task of a political organization (or a pedagogue) to pick campaigns and situations that will shape the social experience and therefore the social consciousness of the masses. “A clear picture cannot be obtained from any book” (70). Hence the organization of a political exposure is the organization of a particular set of experiences in which people “. . . learn to observe from concrete, and above all from topical, political facts and events, *every* other social class and *all* the manifestations of the intellectual, ethical and political life of these classes; . . . [that is] they learn to apply in practice the materialist analysis and the materialist estimate of *all* aspects of the life and activity of *all* classes, strata and groups of the population. . . .” (69).<sup>4</sup> The objective of developing political exposures was, and is, linked dialectically to both a democratic culture of freedom of discussion and disagreement and also a revolutionary commitment to constructing common objectives in order to exercise the political power that is only possible through voluntary unity of action.

For us, the spatial and situational dimensions underscoring this pedagogy are pivotal. One could say that the pedagogy of “political exposure” and the tactics of agit-props were devel-

oped as practices of aesthetic intervention that could effect “a revolutionary transformation of space” in a place and time where the mode of production was rapidly changing. Clearly, the transformation of space we seek today must take place under different conditions—imperialism and its cultural logic of simultaneous fragmentation and integration. We believe we can make use of Lenin’s approach to contribute to specific counterhegemonic practices of particular social movements that reject assimilation and then revolt.

Hence agit-prop tactics are imported and adapted to construct consciousness by bringing people to venues for experiences that reveal and thereby teach their political relationship to the new mode of production of late capitalist imperialism. These political revelations are further extended through a variety of re-presentations: the telling of stories, the writing of exposures, and the circulation of “factography” (Mann, 1996, 266). The specific operations of ideological domination by advanced capitalism and of the ideological constraints on intellectual life imposed by the contradictions of contemporary socialist practice present a situation. What would be the characteristics of such political exposures given the current period of ideological disorientation? We believe that revolutionary education must instill simultaneously a capacity for critical thinking and a readiness to imagine future possibilities for socialist construction, *a critical reorientation that embraces contradictions rather than erasing them.*

Between Cincinnati and Los Angeles there exist no parallels of circumstance, no common left campaign, no related movements of oppressed people, no similar forms of organization. As collaborators, we approach our common questions from very different locations. One of us is a theorist/teacher who works with students inside the university to link them with the Over-the-Rhine People’s Movement in Cincinnati they know nothing about. The other is a theorist/teacher who works inside of the social movement—with bus riders, organizers, and the rare artists whose site of learning is a school for organizers. What ties the experiments together is the common conditions of urban conflict these cities share at this stage of US imperialism’s global economic integration, where “contradictions . . . emerge between capitalist formations and the social and cultural practices they presume but cannot dictate” (Lowe/Lloyd, 1997, 25). Cincinnati is a declining 19th century urban core and Los Angeles is the decentralized emblem of the quintessential 21st century postmodern geography. Yet in each city there are struggles of resistance to the adverse impacts of global restructuring on cities internal to the United States, cities suffering from the export of industry and the active role of the state in privatizing previously public services, such as public assistance, public housing, public transportation, that were devised as a safety net, a social tax to balance capitalist restructuring and are now abandoned. This work is also tied together by the shared theories of two left intellectuals in two different cities cultivating a common approach to aesthetic

intervention that involves particular real people confronting their own real representatives of the dominating class. Our connected discussion here is an exchange of thoughts on our separate experiments. Despite our apparent common ground as architects, our exchange of thoughts is concentrated now on understanding the particular operations of the global system of U.S. imperialism as they are engaged by the locally-situated struggles of resistance of the oppressed-nationality working class.

We are committed to working in a manner that is critical, strategic, and affiliated. There are immense challenges to this work, and learning from the relative success or failure of projects is part of the pleasure. While we are each dedicated to integrating theory and practice in the course of everyday struggle, this integration is exceedingly difficult. We understand that there is always necessarily a disconnect. The social movements themselves are so rich in creative energy that it is difficult to isolate the impact of any particular approach. Therefore, the value of our theoretical framework as measured by practice is hard to determine, and detailed reflection is beyond the scope of this piece. Our goal here is to explain our intentions and describe the experiments undertaken in the course of struggle. We strive to make a meaningful difference and to take responsibility for the impacts of our work. We leave it to the reader to extend the significance of the experiments.

## “NOT NORMAL:” AESTHETIC DISTURBANCES OF MIAMI UNIVERSITY’S CENTER FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN OVER-THE-RHINE

### I. Over-the-Rhine: Cincinnati

Over-the-Rhine, adjacent to the central business district of Cincinnati, is the city’s poorest neighborhood. In 1950 approximately 30,000 people resided there, with whites constituting 99% of that population. Today the figure is about 8,800, 80% black. Of the current residents, most live below the official poverty level for a family of four. Under-employment is high. Of Over-the-Rhine’s 7,500 apartment units, 3,000 are below housing code standards and over 400 buildings stand vacant. The entire area is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Over-the-Rhine’s decline in population and income constitutes the classic story of many inner city neighborhoods across the country, where from a combination of governmental policy and private initiative the nation has structured its own “American Apartheid.” Through FHA-sponsored suburbanization and a changing global economy that has produced deindustrialization, declining wages, joblessness, and homelessness, the segregation of people of color generally and the ‘hypersegregation’ of blacks in particular in America’s inner cities are now structural realities. This is an environment of social and spatial isolation

where the effects of poverty are exacerbated. Cornel West characterizes this inner city black life as “walking nihilism,” life devoid of hope and a future. Lisa Delpit says something similar: “Today’s African American children of poverty look at themselves with the loathing of the nation that despises them” (Delpit, 1997).

Such conditions help explain the urban rebellion that slashed through Cincinnati’s Over-the-Rhine in early April (2001), triggered by the shooting death of black teen Timothy Thomas by a white police officer. Because the media quickly jumped to identify the core problem as police-community relations (which certainly is a significant problem), the opportunity to understand the historical patterns of suburbanization, deindustrialization, joblessness, hypersegregation as contributive to the anger that would unleash a rebellion was effectively erased (Dutton, 2001).

Such a bleak portrait of neighborhood decline and breakdown obscures an important dialectic: that for 30 years now the Over-the-Rhine Peoples Movement—a confederation of neighborhood institutions based in non-profit housing development, social service, religion, community arts, and welfare rights—has been a consistent voice in advancing plans for low and moderate income people. The community is organized, but weak. Decades of disinvestment on the one hand and recent gentrification and displacement on the other have taken their toll on the Movement’s ability to recruit members, articulate its critical voice, and sustain leadership. More recently, 1996 marked the year the Urban Land Institute (ULI) came to Over-the-Rhine to validate an agenda set by a hegemonic alliance of corporate, big business, and city power. In the wake of ULI’s visit, a several months long, city-wide character assassination campaign against Movement leader buddy gray ended tragically with his shooting death by a mentally ill, homeless friend who went off in the feverish context (Dutton, 1999).

2001 marks the twentieth year of my affiliation with the Over-the-Rhine People’s Movement. In this time I have brought students—who are almost exclusively white, well-off, from suburban or small town backgrounds; privileged—to Over-the-Rhine to work with Movement leaders and residents in four kinds of interventions. First, we have engaged urban designs for neighborhood subareas to architectural schemes for mixed-income housing designs. Second, since 1998 we have collaborated with the Over-the-Rhine Housing Network, a non-profit housing development corporation and member of the People’s Movement, to design and build actual livable spaces for low and moderate-income residents. Third, we have institutionalized our presence in Over-the-Rhine by establishing the multi-disciplinary Center for Community Advocacy. Following the maxim that social being forms social consciousness, the Center takes as its primary mission the selection of educational venues that can shape the social experience and therefore the social consciousness of learners, especially in ways that illustrate how

the political system works (political exposures). Faculty members “teaching” at the Center work with local organizations and Movement leaders to engage research questions and develop political exposures out of that research. Our fourth intervention has been our recent work in agit-props, of which I will describe one project below.

## II. Strategies of Resistance: Agit-Props

Our venture into agit-props came at the request of the Housing Network to celebrate its tenth year of history in 1999. This request marked an important point in the Network’s learning to think through how it might advance its mission to develop progressive political consciousness among its resident base in ways beyond providing housing. As work proceeded across two semesters in conversation with neighborhood leaders, the direction shifted to investigate ways to celebrate the entire history of the People’s Movement, with a particular focus on the struggles for affordable housing and social justice. Were there ways to challenge the hegemonic representations about Over-the-Rhine that reinforce gentrification and subjugate the marginalized? Could students intervene in a critical mapping of space that contests dominant representations and/or exposes dominant practices about how gentrification is organized politically and culturally? Could counter-hegemonic perceptions be constructed that advance the interests of the People’s Movement?

Three significant issues came to underscore these experimental projects.

First, the projects question the ideology of urban space, particularly around issues of gentrification and its flipside, displacement and homelessness. Recognizing that ideology is partly a material practice where space plays a role in its constitution, the projects introduce a counter-hegemonic content into the reading of urban space. Over-the-Rhine Movement leaders see gentrification as a contemporary historical form in this nation’s string of historical processes that have proven tragic for under served and marginalized peoples—“Manifest Destiny,” land grab, social cleansing, imperialism. The projects position gentrification as part of this continuum of domination in American history. Relatedly, this strategy to introduce a progressive political content challenges the “natural,” common-sense (ideological) process of gentrification, leading to a spatial re-reading that counters the presumed “natural order of things.” This effort to develop a critical, pedagogical literacy reveals gentrification as a particular historical construction *and* as a producer of displacement and homelessness. The purpose is to educate people to examine and unpack this dialectical relationship. Hence, the spaces of our interventions in Cincinnati and Miami University were transformed to restore a suppressed history and to challenge dominant trends in urban development that further the interests of the haves on the backs

of the have-nots. The installations seek to shift understanding, to turn seemingly innocuous spaces that are able to hide their history and politics, into ones that critique that innocuousness and point to ways to advance the lives of marginalized folks through the People's Movement. The projects attempt to shift the meaning of urban space in ways that not only raises questions about how we understand history, but how we might imagine a future for the People's Movement.

Second, this effort to transform the hegemonic meanings of a place by enacting a spatial transformation is sharpened in a provocative way. Our experimental projects are formally transgressive. The whole point is to be noticed, to disturb, to unsettle – to be out of place – thereby complementing progressive political content with aesthetic forms that break the decorum of the settings. By breaking the decorum associated with those places, our plan was that they would become denaturalized because powers of authority would reveal themselves to reassert the “norms” of the place against the heresy of the transgression. In other words, in order to domesticate a transgressive intervention in a place, establishment power typically reveals itself – sometimes, as we learned, quite forcefully – which turns the natural into the arbitrary, thereby opening up the possibility for other meanings to emerge and gain ascendancy in a new discursive space. Questions of legitimacy, heretofore veiled and beyond question, now have to be struggled over.

The impermanence of the installations furthers this strategy. (Our agit-prop interventions were up for a week at the longest.) Unlike much public art that is permanent, the fleeting and temporary nature of the experimental projects served to resist their domestication. Some of these projects were simply not tolerated. Their impermanent formal qualities helped to communicate a radical urgency with a critical bite. Acting as a sort of three dimensional graffiti, they could not be brushed off or consigned to an inconsequential status that amounts to a take-it-or-leave-it history that people can ignore. Much public art becomes absorbed precisely because of its permanence. By becoming accommodated it loses value as a form of resistance, as the establishment never has to reveal its claims to legitimacy in the maintenance of normalcy. Once accommodated, the opportunity for political exposure recedes. As geographer Tim Cresswell states, “People are only aware of the question of legitimacy when an alternative is presented to them and social groups compete over claims of legitimacy” (Cresswell, 1996, p. 20). Without raising to consciousness how normalcy is constructed, the ideologically dominant is able to pass itself off as the normal and to hide its partiality.

Third, these experimental projects not only sought to be critical, but to articulate direction as well. They sought to agitate and propagandize – to work as agit-props. Conceiving our work as such entailed a responsibility for the work to be double-edged. On one hand, installations challenge the hegem-

onic representations of gentrification, patterns of uneven development, and the like; in short, they critique a particular organization of knowledge that serves gentrifying interests. But on the other hand – and this is what distinguishes most agit-prop work from most public art – the installations carry the burden to construct new knowledge and new geographies useful to the strategic advancement of the Over-the-Rhine People's Movement. The latter is a very different task than the typical artistic project of critique, because to help espouse direction for the purpose of political strategy is a practice that can only come out of affiliation.

### III. Oppose Gentrification in Practice: The Milner Hotel Commemoration

An important but sad episode in the People's Movement history was the effort to save the Milner Hotel. Since 1944, the Milner Hotel housed low-income occupants, providing both long-term and temporary emergency shelter for individuals and families. The hotel was privately owned and unsubsidized. It was often used as quick access emergency housing by the Mental Health Board, Salvation Army, Red Cross, and area homeless shelters. On May 20, 1994, the city of Cincinnati, while campaigning that neighborhoods generally should exhibit an “economic mix” of citizens, demolished the hotel after it had spent nearly two million dollars to acquire it. In its stead was built “Greenwich on the Park,” a middle to upper income housing block by the development company Towne Properties, whose owner was the former mayor of the city. More than 100 low-income residents were displaced. Few received relocation assistance. A 1993 City Council resolution to provide long-term housing replacements for the residents was never enacted thoroughly.

On Saturday, May 20, 2000, in a little park that runs down the middle of Eighth Street and fronts Greenwich on the Park, the sixth anniversary of the loss of the Milner Hotel was commemorated within a setting designed by students. Former residents of the Milner, housing activists, and community leaders and citizens gathered to hear speeches, sing songs, and re-commit themselves to ongoing and future struggles.

The artistic installation honored the history of community activist efforts to save the hotel. The installation had three components. First was the bright-red banner that wrapped around trees and light posts within the park, just above head-level. The brilliant red, in contrast with the green of the trees, caught the eye and signaled to passerby that an event was happening. Its intention was to draw attention and pull passerby in for a closer look.

Second were five, life-sized silhouettes, which took their form as absences cut out of wood panels. The absences represented a critique of the dominant culture's gaze upon the homeless. The effect of the gaze is erasure. The dominant culture's gaze

operates to ignore the homeless, to place them out of sight as if they are not there: in essence, to look right through them as if they are invisible. Suspended within the absence of each silhouette was a presence, where one could read texts by people who lived in the Milner and poetry by homeless people. One silhouette represented the late Reverend Maurice McCracken, who was 87 years old at the time and a key activist in the struggle. He nearly died in a two week fast to persuade the city to save the hotel.

The third component of the installation was the variety of plaques placed on the ground and scattered throughout the park. These plaques told the story of the Milner. They also told the story of the Cherokee Nation and the Trail of Tears. Many Over-the-Rhine leaders and citizens draw inspiration from Native American struggles to keep their land and ways of life. Even "reservation" is commonly used in public discourse about Over-the-Rhine. Hegemonic power often invokes the neighborhood negatively as a reservation, as a place of pathology, while Movement folks see Over-the-Rhine as a special reserve that needs development but not at their expense. At issue, of course, is the control of land, and by extension, the right of a predominant community of color to self-determination. Arguably few progressives have problems with the concept of self-determination when the subjects are subjugated peoples outside of the borders of the dominating states. But the matter becomes fuzzy when extending the right to self-determination to oppressed nationalities and peoples within such states: "progressive people are not unified around a shared understanding of the interrelationship between class exploitation and the oppression of nations internal to the United States" (Program Demand Group, 2001) – which SNCC and the Black Panthers referred to as "internal imperialism," "internal colonialism," or the "black colony." For me, linking the stories of the Milner and the Cherokee Nation helps to position the installation as an anti-imperialist effort to affirm the right of self-determination against the structural adjustments of globalization. (I refer to myself here because the People's Movement does not quite conceive of itself in such terms, that is, it does not see itself as anti-imperialist while the ethic of self-determination is very strong.) At the very least, the juxtaposed stories of the Milner and the Trail of Tears did challenge readers to look for parallels, distinctions, differences, and provided a historical context for thinking about the city's effort to socially cleanse this part of the urban landscape.

## **"MAKE HISTORY:" THE CULTURE PRODUCTION CAMPAIGN**

### **1. Los Angeles: one site of struggle**

The regional transportation system is a site of contestation in which the spatial practices of differentiation and integration, of consent and dissent produce the particular partition that is

Los Angeles (Mann, 1991, 33). Beginning with the "manhattanization" of downtown Los Angeles, the corporate elite – backed by investment from the east and west – has worked to build a "world class city," transforming the scale of the regional infrastructure so that it can function successfully as a hub in a transnational network of exchange. A cargo-transport corridor from LA's port to the inland rail lines, which will give the rest of the country access to Pacific Rim trade, cuts into the earth as it bisects East and West Los Angeles from north to south. A new subway/metro rail system, the economic boondoggle of the 1990s, serves "choice" riders (those who have choice of transportation) traveling to and from the suburbs and peripheral cities – Long Beach, Riverside, the San Fernando Valley.

Erased in the world class city plan is the bus system that is the workhorse, the lifesaver, for 400,000 "transit dependent" people (those who have no choice) – black, Latino, white, Asian, Native American, female, elderly, inner city high school students, the disabled, immigrant populations, many profoundly poor – who must travel to places that rail will never go. Many bus riders spend from 2 to 4 hours a day on the bus. Bus riding shapes every part of daily life, and thus identity, and the quality of bus service determines the quality of life. Yet, for decades the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) allowed the bus system to deteriorate. The buses were old, filthy, unreliable and late, overcrowded, and powered by carcinogenic diesel fuels. The "spatial economy" of the region was registered in the relationship between a "first world" rail system and a "third world" bus system.

In 1994 the Strategy Center formed the Bus Riders Union/Sindicato de Pasajeros (BRU/SDP) and initiated a mass organizing campaign to "fight transit racism" (Mann, 1997). As part of this campaign, the Strategy Center filed a class action civil rights lawsuit that charged the MTA with violating Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 14th Amendment to the Constitution, based on findings of intentional discrimination as well as disparate adverse impact on minorities. In 1996, the Strategy Center and the BRU/SDP secured a federal Consent Decree with the MTA that not only saved the monthly bus pass but cuts fares, secured and expanded the bus transportation infrastructure of the county region, created many union jobs and placed the Bus Riders Union in a joint Working Group with the MTA. The plan replaces the dysfunctional diesel buses with a clean fuel bus fleet that expands into new service areas previously unreachable by public transportation.

In this context, the Bus Riders Union campaign is winning demands that redistribute economic resources while simultaneously impacting the physical fabric of the city in ways we cannot yet imagine. This major shift in resources to the transit dependent and expanding rather than eliminating bus service breaks down the historically-constituted segregation of the city (the racial demarcation/compartition of social space): The struggle is now cast as a nation-wide campaign for civil rights

through redistribution of public resources in the aftermath of the reactionary *Sandoval* Supreme Court decision.<sup>5</sup>

## II. Practical Experiment: "As the Bus Rolls/La Mentira del MTA"

As the political right moves to restrict the social space of struggle, we seek to expand it. One project illustrates this action.

Having organized on the buses since 1994, we know that the bus itself is truly an amazing social space, posing many obstacles to its occupation but affording ever-new opportunities for lively political exposures. In Los Angeles, public space and public life are diminishing. Yet, the bus, largely because of the work of the Bus Riders Union, is an expanding space. In this context, while cross-cultural contradictions easily flare up, daily life in the common space of the bus creates a basis for unity with regard to issues confronted in the larger political space of the city. We have come to understand that the bus is a stage for community interaction in a moving theater of daily life.

The evolution of actions into theater has been organic as well as strategic. In 1999, the Strategy Center formed an explicit partnership – the Labor/Community Strategy Center, the Bus Riders Union/Sindicato de Pasajeros, and Cornerstone Theater Company – to bring together community organizers, activists, culture producers, and bus riders to create theater on the bus. The Strategy Center was able to offer intensive workshops in improvisation, the essence of which is learning the collective art of occupying space, transforming it, and extending the space created by others.

The central objective of the project has been to broaden participation in the campaign for transportation equity by creating experiences that can increase understanding of race, ethnicity, nationality, language, and gender, all of which are intertwined within the distinct identities of this fragmented transit-dependent population. Commonly, riders imagine that they themselves or other riders cause their hardships, particularly the poor condition of the bus system. Especially because of the great diversity of nations of origin for immigrants (Latinos from Mexico and the many nations of Central America and Asians from every country along the Pacific Rim as well as India) and the variety of languages as well as class antagonisms within ethnic groups, there are many lines of demarcation for the dominating culture to exploit. Riders often accept government cut backs as given and blame each other for making things worse. In this ethnically diverse but highly segregated region, the teatro has developed on-the-bus pieces that use humor, multiple languages, and the communicative power of performance to make the shared public space of the buses into a more explicitly occupied counterspace. Through performance, we work to create a common experience of shared learning

about each others differences and our relationship to each other by turning the bus itself into a space where riders control the dialogue, not the MTA.

Our particular focus has been to develop live performance techniques and approaches to bus theater that can be directly implemented throughout the organizing work: this is not a group of actors but a group of bus rider-organizers whose performances invite "spectators to become spect-actors," as Boal would describe the transformation, an "aesthetic of cognitive mapping," in Jameson's terms.<sup>6</sup> Through experimentation in the improv workshop (where no language or culture was common to all participating rider/actors), a method has been devised for the group development of material that combines improvisation, video taping, writing, and repeating of the improvisation process until script outlines evolve that can be adapted by performers in the ever-changing circumstances on the bus. The improv workshop culminated with the development of the bilingual piece modeled after the device of a telenovela – *As the Bus Rolls/La Mentira del MTA*, which has been performed on the buses and at bus stops by three different casts of performers, each lending a different character to the "script" when improvised in different settings with different groups of bus riders, speaking different languages. In costume, the performers occupy places on the bus that require them to speak to each other across the space. Feet planted firmly and one hand attached to some sturdy element of the bus structure the other hand free for a prop or a gesture, they improvise their performances based on nodes of a plot structure, weaving the roles of passenger-spect-actors (including the driver) into their performances as they go along. They are accompanied by organizers ready to engage individuals with literature and invitations to BRU membership and, on a good day, by photographers and musicians. In a crowded bus with 42 people sitting and 30 people standing, the contested nature of the terrain comes into play immediately, and the political exposure begins.

Performance on the buses is difficult, and the ability of the teatro to occupy and transform the space depends largely on the consent of the bus riders and the drivers – this is the essence of a counter-hegemonic practice. On-the-bus performances are indeed able to hold the attention of a racially diverse and multilingual audience. Yet this is not an audience of well-behaved theater-goers; often riders are at first taken aback by the performance – "why is a woman with a wedding dress speaking in Spanish about some fiancé who is late for the wedding, and what the hell does this have to do with bus service or the BRU?" With every performance, riders and drivers define the play. Of course, the riders do not all respond to the theater, if they respond it isn't necessarily positive, and they may not agree with the BRU. For some vocal riders, participation in the dramatic exchanges on the bus is a cultural challenge, for others it has become an amenity to their ride. Taken as a group, bus riders understand that, at the least, the performance is

another effort to give life on the buses more dignity in the face of humiliation by the discriminatory actions of the MTA. They understand themselves in relation to the world differently. For the time of this performance, the bus is a community of bus riders, however much they may disagree, and the roles of the MTA, the city, state, US government, the World Bank and their indignities are exposed. Much of the teatro's objective is accomplished by that understanding.

The on-the-bus theater work is still in its early stages. The bus remains far too overcrowded; with a captive audience of bus riders, response ranges from engaged to estranged to oblivious. Still, these talented and brave performers intent on creating counterspace have stretched the boundaries of this public venue, and the potential for collective political exposure and ideological reorientation is tremendous. All of this work brings people into a real fight to win an actual redistribution of wealth in the region. Thus, as the Bus Riders Union succeeds in winning its demands, the bus space expands, the number of spectators and spect-actors keeps growing, and there is a positive dialectic between the impact of the organizing, the impact of the theater, the policy victories, and the growing size of the social movement.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> As a means of orienting the reader to our politics of culture, we clarify that when we speak of the "social movements" with which we are affiliated, we are not talking about movements that are counterposed to the working class or class struggle as they are often characterized. The movements about which we speak have evolved from a time when the Black liberation movement spoke of counter-hegemonic insurgent "new social movements" against the political structures of U.S. imperialism. At a time when the bureaucracy of organized trade unions, in alliance with the Democratic Party, worked for the war in Vietnam and against civil rights for Blacks in the U.S., new social movements asserted "independence" – not from the working class or class struggle but from the pro-imperialist politics and racist apparatuses of the labor bureaucracy and the corporate-liberal Party. Under conditions of globalization of production and deindustrialization of the U.S., these social movements – although they concern themselves with broad political questions – are distinctly working class. They bring focus to the nature of exploitation and oppression under imperialism – the exploitation of nations and oppression of national minority peoples – as the imperative of the imperialist bourgeoisie, that is, their mode of class struggle under the conditions of a moribund capitalism (Program Demand Group, 2001; Mann, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> In "The Brick and the Balloon: Architecture, Idealism and Land Speculation," Jameson explains that the cultural developments of late capitalism may be called "postmodern," but that they are not post-capitalist, nor is analysis of their evolution *post-Marxism*: "... the account of capital developed by Marx and by so many others since his day can perfectly well accommodate the changes in question; and indeed the dialectic itself has as its most vital



philosophical function to coordinate two aspects or faces of history which we otherwise seem ill-equipped to think: namely identity and difference all at once, the way in which a thing can both change and remain the same, can undergo the most astonishing mutations and expansions and still constitute the operation of some basic and persistent structure" (Jameson, 1998b, 33). We share this perspective.

<sup>3</sup> In this historical context, agit-prop was not stylistic, but the invention of new forms of poetry, painting, architecture, theater with many aesthetic influences, including Futurism, Suprematism, and Constructivism. The rich and complex history of this avant-garde art-making practice entails its role in the political education, indeed ideological transformation, of the "new socialist man," its transformation under the constraints of Socialist Realism and the fervor of the "realism debates" that followed, and its adoption by post-World War II revolutionary movements (Mann, 1996). The Western Marxist distaste for the term today results from the separation of Marxism from the strategies of revolutionary movements. The term is adopted today by revolutionary-minded culture producers to enliven the strategy-driven character of their art-making, which employs a wide variety of tactics and techniques. Aligning ourselves here within this rich tradition of agit-prop work, our approach then is not "public art," which is the front line of artistic accommodation to the dominant culture defined by the funder, that is, the state (ironically, just the opposite of what is mandated for public intellectual practice). Nor is it

"political art," which privileges the artistic freedom of individuals to express their radical politics, whatever that politics might be. Nor is it "community-based" work aimed at "getting with the users" and "simply extending what people already think" (Dutton/Mann, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> For our purposes, this pedagogical theory is elaborated by Antonio Gramsci in his theory of the organic intellectual (Gramsci, 1997), by Louis Althusser with the analysis of educational institutions as "ideological state apparatuses" (Althusser, 1972), by Paulo Freire as a "pedagogy of the oppressed" (Freire, 1972). For all these pedagogues, the location from which one theorizes and acts is absolutely consequential to the success of consciousness transformation and effective social change. For Gramsci, the organic intellectual had to be schooled in the experience of social movements in order to be effective in developing political strategy. Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed was specifically grounded in the act of learning to read about people's everyday lives in order to generate meaningful learning that would lead to a new understanding of political conditions.

<sup>5</sup> *Alexander v. Sandoval*, Supreme Court Decision, April 24, 2001, which undermines civil rights law.

<sup>6</sup> Key members of the teatro on the bus project include: Martín Hernandez, Kate Kinkade, Barbara Lott Holland, Jackie Campos, Sheppard Petit, Rosalio Mendiola.