SEEING POWER

ART AND ACTIVISM IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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SEEING POWER

THE STORY IN NEW ORLEANS

After visiting Katrina-ravaged New Orleans in 2006, the artist and activist Paul Chan was struck by the thought that the decimated landscapes and looming oak trees in New Orleans reminded him, more than anything, of the minimalist set called for in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. It was, perhaps, an odd association, but Chan saw what he saw: a theater of absurdity in the weed-grown streets. Beckett's play begins with the most simple stage instructions, *a country road, a tree, evening*. It is both everywhere and nowhere; placeless, without context and almost outside of time. The flooded remnants of post-Katrina neighborhoods seemed to fit that description in all its most haunting implications. Where once houses stood, there were only stone front steps that led to homes that weren't, their foundations disappearing amongst the abundant tropical flora, the desiccated trash from a flood long passed still hauled into piles along the roads.

Chan decided that he wanted to produce *Waiting for Godot* in New Orleans. And not just anywhere in the city—certainly

not in one of its downtown theaters: he wanted to produce the play on the streets of the Lower Ninth Ward and Gentilly, the neighborhoods most affected by the storm. His idea was for the play to be performed at the very site of the disaster, with the traumatized landscape of New Orleans serving as backdrop for Beckett's tragicomedy. Chan wanted a play that would respond to the complicated frustrations, potent anger, and metaphysical and tangible dreams of the people in the neighborhoods immediately affected by the storm, but also one that could communicate loss and frustration to a wider audience, as well.

Beckett's play is about waiting—waiting for something that never comes. And in 2006, New Orleans residents knew all about waiting. The city languished with promises of FEMA trailers, federal loans, and Army Corps of Engineers assistance. New Orleans residents had been relocated to Houston, Atlanta, Nashville, and other cities, and were waiting to be able to return to New Orleans. And for those who remained in the city, there was plenty of waiting, too—waiting to go back to jobs, waiting for repairs to crumbling schools, transportation, and housing.

Chan's plan to produce *Godot* in New Orleans had an important antecedent: in 1993, Susan Sontag had produced a version of *Waiting for Godot* in Sarajevo as bombs dropped and the city's streets burned. Sontag's project was controversial. Like Chan's, Sontag's impetus came from an urgent desire not to be a bystander to a tragedy: "But I couldn't again be just a witness: that is, meet and visit, tremble with fear, feel brave, feel depressed, have heartbreaking conversations, grow ever more indignant, lose weight. If I went back, it would be to pitch in and do something."

Sontag hoped to galvanize the international cultural community to bring attention to the atrocities in Sarajevo, and, perhaps, to lobby the U.S. government to intervene—a position that garnered much controversy from those on the left. As she stated in an interview in *The New York Times*, "It's not Godot I am waiting for. Like most of the people in Sarajevo, I am waiting for Clinton."

However, as much as Chan and Sontag shared a similar political and personal impulse to do something about a tragedy, their methodologies were manifestly disparate. Where Sontag sought to insert herself into a war that she compared to the Spanish Civil War, Chan's primary concern, as he says, was "to bring something like a play into a devastated landscape like New Orleans in such a way that not only becomes aesthetically interesting but locally sustainable."

Intriguingly, Chan did owe quite a bit to Sontag—though not to her staging of *Godot*. What inspired Chan was Sontag's book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, on war photography, in which she challenges the oft-accepted notion that war photography is inherently antiwar, or, in fact, that it refutes violence at all. She argues instead that war imagery can often feed the appetite for violence by ripping the subject from its context, and making its representation a facile consumption.

In 2006, there were many media stories about New Orleans and the disaster capitalism that had ruined it almost as much as the natural disaster itself, but little of the journalism had produced fundamental change, or helped the beleaguered city. As photographs, news dispatches, and NGO reports piled up, the avalanche of facts about the city's plight began to look like the "disaster tourism" buses that were then roaming the streets of its neighborhoods: outsiders could safely view the aftermath of the storm without doing anything to help. Whether it was the reporting on the storm or this actual disaster tourism, an economy of voyeurism without any agenda of social change had made itself felt.

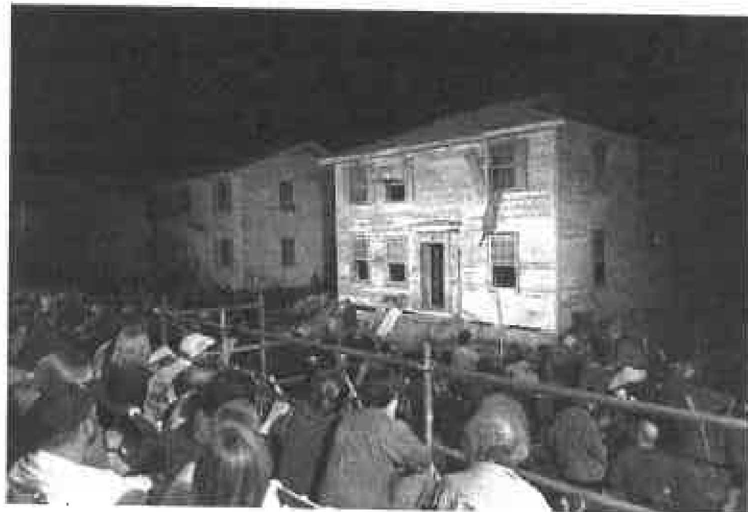
So Chan started to plan. He hoped to avoid merely doing a cultural project for its own sake. Instead, he wanted to create a project that might actually alleviate the suffering of those affected by the storm. In order to get the work done, Chan—along

with Creative Time's producer Gavin Kroeber and director Anne Pasternak, Classical Theater of Harlem director Christopher McElroen, and myself—initiated numerous get-to-know-you meetings. Chan was adamant from the beginning that he wasn't interested in having people actually rewrite or reinvent the play itself. He understood that people had enough on their plates as it was, and that the point wasn't to actually remake this work of theater. Instead, the meetings were held to give all parties a chance to say hello, hear what people needed and what they were going through, and to find ways in which Chan's production of *Godot* could lend both metaphorical and tangible assistance.

There were hundreds of meetings. We scheduled sit-downs with people we knew from a wide variety of backgrounds (activists, theater directors, teachers, preachers, city council leaders, artists) and introduced the premise of the project and listened to their concerns and ideas. At first the range of personalities came from our own personal networks, and our sense of obvious people to meet. These ranged from Chan's work with activist lawyer Bill Quigley, to meetings with the city council representative of the ninth ward, to conversations with Malik Rahim, ex–Black Panther and founder of the community activist organization Common Ground. At every meeting, we asked the participants whom we should talk to next. As the time passed, an elaborate matrix of personalities emerged, all of whom brought with them a complex and overlapping network of perspectives on New Orleans—here was an extraordinarily diverse set of views on neighborhoods, class, race, slavery, food, the recovery, and art. After a few months, our familiarity with the politics and the personalities involved on the front lines of the recovery effort was not only sharpened, but the personalities themselves also became familiar with us. What we saw, when all was said and done, was not a unified array of perspectives, but an extremely fraught series of relationships and political tensions

that constituted a community—tensions that were only exacerbated in a time of crisis.

All of this interpersonal time—one could argue that it was a form of Saul Alinsky–inspired community work—helped ground the metaphor of theater in the tangible experience of a local audience. At every meeting, we heard complaints about disaster tourism and social work carpetbagging. Across the populace of New Orleans there was a growing cynicism regarding what outside assistance actually resulted in. With every gesture of help, with every documentary shot, the recovery nevertheless languished. The people of New Orleans understood spectacle



in a very concrete way. They had seen the entire arsenal of cultural production from television specials, documentaries, photographs in newspapers, and radio shows all pile up in order to sell their trauma on the visual market. It wasn't an abstraction. The theory of spectacle had become a disheartening, tangible reality.

In a sense it could be said that the entire city of New Orleans had begun to see power in a different light. Citizens' eyes

had become more focused to see past the promises of television and to see, instead, a visual machine for consumerism. The promises made were not all that different from those of snake oil salesmen from years past. And as we began to meet with the wide array of personalities in New Orleans, we too began to gain a sense of not only how the residents saw power operating in the landscape of spectacle, but also how they saw power distributed amongst themselves. We learned to view the project through a complex matrix of political tensions and affinities throughout the city's neighborhoods. We witnessed racial tensions across the board, including the dominant exclusionary experiences of white organizations versus black ones. We experienced political tensions between outside activist organizations and those that were homegrown.

A key partner of our project was the Classical Theater of Harlem, which traveled to New Orleans with Chan to produce the play. The division of labor in the production was fairly straightforward: Chan would work on the sets, but he would focus predominately on "the back end"—that is to say, he would aim to make it possible for a play to actually matter in this place and time. The Classical Theater of Harlem arrived in April 2007 to coordinate theater workshops with high school and elementary school students. They brought with them a community organizing method from their work in Harlem: a series of potlucks where residents could meet the cast and talk about the play. Each potluck was hosted by a different community leader, who would then be in charge of inviting their friends. Because the play starred a local celebrity—Wendell Pierce, who had just starred in the HBO television series *The Wire*—residents were quite enthusiastic to share some food and ponder the implications of Beckett.

We held the first potluck dinner at the house of Lower Ninth Ward resident Ronald Lewis, whose backyard is home to the House of Dance & Feathers. The fact that Lewis has a museum

in his backyard should tell you something about his dynamic personality. He hobbled around on a cane and regaled anyone who came by with the history of the neighborhood, the rivalries and pageantry of the Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs, and, most critically, the story of the neighborhood that was no more. Not only was Lewis universally respected in New Orleans, but he also had a keen sense of who would need to be there to make this project work. It would only take failing to invite one person or community group to threaten the legitimacy of this project.

As we sat in Lewis's backyard on a perfectly temperate evening in the fall of 2007, local organizer and Ninth Ward resident Robert Green Sr., who had named himself the ambassador for the project, looked over the group of people eating crawfish, fried chicken, and beans and rice, and said, "Looking at the different people that have come together around this project, I know it will be a success." He said this because through our series of meetings—and, perhaps more than anything, through perseverance—we had created a social environment that accommodated even some of the most doubtful. The map of complex social relationships became a foundation upon which an aesthetic could flourish.

Much of the writing on the *Waiting for Godot* project has focused predominantly on the play, its location, and what might be called its social organizing component. In other words, the commentary has tended to acknowledge the importance of grounding an aesthetic in human relations. As Holland Cotter wrote in *The New York Times*:

> While all these arrangements were pending, the artist sought the advice of locals with strong thoughts on the project, among them the artist Willie Birch, the community organizer Ronald Lewis and Robert Green Sr., whose granddaughter had died in the flooded Lower Ninth. Initially, they were skeptical of what looked like

> to be another carpetbagging venture: privileged outside artist comes into a stricken city, makes a dramatic gesture for which he gets credit, and departs, leaving nothing useful behind.

By emphasizing the social relationships on the ground, this reading almost gets far enough to acknowledge that without this community work, the play would be something altogether different—that the aesthetic would no longer be the aesthetic.

Yet the fact remains that the capacity to view the local relationships of power—the ability to see which people in New Orleans would need to be on board with this project to make it matter locally—eluded a qualified outsider's grasp. That is to say, even for Cotter, who did a substantial visit to the project, the ecology of local personalities and community groups was ultimately unfamiliar, which meant that he was left to understand local relationships through a distanced lens.

From a national and international perspective, the local is an impossible—if not mythic—dynamic to interpret. This was another reason why it was important for Chan to enlist the eyes and social acumen of those on the ground. Robert Green Sr. could actually see the power relationships in New Orleans up close. By definition, spectacle obscures these relationships, but by putting the "back end" of the project at the fore, it could instead be deployed to highlight them. As a resident of the Lower Ninth and one of the first to return, Green Sr. was privy to the myriad of organizing efforts and communities attempting to rebuild.

As he told Chan in an interview,

> The first time I met you, we were sitting down at the table in the trailer and basically you presented me with an idea of what you wanted to do. I had an antagonistic attitude towards people who come in—not so much for

> people who come in general but for people who come in with projects they want to do. But after getting a chance to listen, I realized that what you were trying to do was a great thing. Rather than just give in to the idea easily, I sweated you for a good while, making you believe I didn't like the idea and really giving you a hard time. I wanted a chance to wait a little bit, read through the material. Once I read through the material and some news reviews of *Godot*, I realized that this was a perfect thing for us.

A versatile figure, Green has navigated various racial and neighborhood groups and is aware of their tensions, histories, and points of unity. And he saw how this community would relate to the art being produced with, by, and for them.

Because of the way the project was produced, the play and its various tentacles became legible at numerous levels of power, and what each participant saw was different. Part of what Chan accomplished in New Orleans was to foster a way of seeing that foregrounded the importance of that fraught social being called "community." Developing a community around *Waiting for Godot* was, in essence, a strategy for engaging a locality as a necessary part of making the work legible.

The project was developed with an awareness of power at multiple levels: in order to make a metaphor matter, we had to produce relationships that accounted for the deleterious effects of power. Which is all to say that in order for the project to matter to people most affected by Katrina, it had to foment human relationships. Paul Chan and his production of *Waiting for Godot* in New Orleans is thus a story that has major implications—we can look to it for examples of the strategies and techniques necessary to produce meaningful experiences today.

Ultimately, seeing power is a skill-set that emerges as one adapts to the camouflaging effects of spectacle and familiarizes

oneself with the infrastructures of power that operate behind any cultural action. A theater production parachuted into New Orleans is simply different from one that places community organizing at its core and seeks to touch the lives of people suffering. A familiarity with the infrastructures of power provides the material context from which claims are made and gestures deployed. The capacity to see power matters.

SEEING THROUGH THE HAZE: INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE

We are beginning to be able to see the shadowy world of cultural coercion come into relief. It is not easy, and we are clearly making mistakes. But our vision is focusing. We see that the doodles given to us by a friend can mean more to us than the art on the walls of a museum. We see how radically the graffiti art we love changes as it makes its way into corporate advertisements. We are beginning to sense that the context of a gesture—whether it is produced by a television network or by friends that we trust—lends much to its interpretation. Just as we saw with Paul Chan's *Waiting for Godot*, the implications of spectacle can be felt in everyday experiences. Everyday people are beginning to understand at a very intuitive level that power uses culture to manipulate them and, conversely, that moments that are free of that coercion are uniquely special.

After watching most of our cultural experiences sacrificed to various kinds of consumerism, a generation is emerging that is learning to see through the smoke and mirrors of cultural production. This is a response accumulated over time. Indeed, we can now be said to possess a sixth sense that looks for the manipulations and the gears by which culture is produced. And this is a good thing. Our new awareness of the forces that lurk

just outside of view has an interesting history in the art world—indeed, this form of self-conscious and self-critical aesthetic production even has its own name: institutional critique. Its best iterations were created in the 1970s and '80s by the artists Hans Haacke, Fred Wilson, and Andrea Fraser.

In a seminal project, *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971*, that was scheduled to be presented at the Guggenheim Museum, Haacke attempted to display the slum landholdings record (from 1951 to 1971) of one of the members of the Guggenheim board of directors, Harry Shapolsky. This provocation caused a stir at the museum, as it threatened the economic support of the institution itself. Haacke's show was cancelled, which only led to a larger media blitz and controversy. In a single maneuver, Haacke had displayed the political economy that lurked just behind the walls of the museum. As opposed to a neutral white cube (or sphere, in the case of the Guggenheim), Haacke showed that a museum was the product of tangible relationships connected to capital, which held them up and made them exist.

The battle against the putative neutrality of the white cube thus became an ongoing artistic and political investigation. In 1988, performance artist Andrea Fraser took on the persona of a museum guide named Jane Castleton and led a critical and entertaining tour of the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. In 1992, Fred Wilson reorganized the collection of the Maryland Historical Society in order to represent the racist histories that remained entombed there. In shaking the skeletons from the closets, institutional critique made it clear that ignoring the political economy behind the forms of cultural production was, in fact, problematic.

However, as institutional critique grew in reputation—with artists like Daniel Buren, Hans Haake, Fred Wilson, Michael Asher, and Andrea Fraser gaining large museum exhibitions—a certain obvious question presented itself: what does it mean

for institutions to embrace their own critique? In her article "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," published in the September 2005 issue of *Artforum*, Fraser responds to this basic query by considering whether one can view the art world as somehow separate from the real world:

> It's not a question of being against the institution: We are the institution. It's a question of what kind of institution we are, what kind of values we institutionalize, what forms of practice we reward, and what kinds of rewards we aspire to.

Fraser suggests that it is an absurdity to remove the arts from the interworkings of the rest of the political economy, which not only shapes the institutions that pepper the landscape, but the people themselves that move through it. Nonetheless, the challenge of institutional critique was significant: how could an artist have the capacity to structurally address the production of power that not only lived behind the walls of a museum, but also in the entire infrastructural world and even in the hearts of every person? The answer, of course, was that most artists couldn't. And who can blame them?

What could hardly be understood even a decade ago was that the work of institutional critique foretold a manner of seeing that would begin to settle into the retinas of a generation. That is to say, institutional critique only hinted at our contemporary form of seeing: we are aware that power resides behind the walls of a museum, but we are also aware that it resides in the personal power of artists, activists, and every gesture in the social world.

An anecdote might be necessary to bring this point into relief. In early 2014, an article in *The Next Web* reported that at least 67.65 million Facebook users—and as many as 137.76 million—might have been fake. This meant that between 5.5

percent and 11.2 percent of the site's total users did not exist and did not, in other words, correspond to real people. Why was this a problem? Mostly because the fake identities were being used to produce a false sense of support: corporations used these personalities to like their products, political advocacy groups used them to suggest support for causes and candidates that might not have been there. But this was not, in and of itself, a concern for Facebook. What made the company anxious was that Facebook users would see right through this charade and realize that the site has been saturated by overzealous marketers. These users understand the language and logic of co-optation and advertising intuitively, and as Facebook relies on these users to contribute to a massive financial return for the company's shareholders, it could not risk an erosion of trust by its users.

ALIENATION SEES CONSPIRACY MORE THAN POWER

When I worked at a museum, I was able to see firsthand how radically different people's perceptions informed the way they looked at art. At MASS MoCA, our exhibitions would stay up for almost nine months—a long time for the museum business. Since the museum is nestled in a poor town of 12,000 people in Western Massachusetts, we had a vast audience of different types of viewers. I quickly learned that the idea that museums only cater to the art elite was a radically inaccurate one. Since MASS MoCA has no endowment, it has to survive on ticket sales that produce a particular kind of political economy, though one that is ultimately accountable to its broad audiences. Museums are civic spaces that often bring in families that are tired of going to the movies together. As opposed to the snotty art world, audiences that the arts are often accused of catering to, museum visitorship is, in fact, extremely broad.

I've already mentioned the large exhibition of political art I organized called *The Interventionists*, which looked at political interventions from a wide array of cultural producers and activists from around the world. It was a highly visual and social show designed to be people-friendly and provocative. Downstairs from the political art exhibition, we had on view paintings from Leipzig on loan from the Rubell Family collection in Florida. In political art circles, it is a widely held belief that painting is the enemy—unless of course it is a painting that points out some political atrocity. Displaying a collection of paintings by multiple white, male German painters would thus strike many as a particularly egregious example of museums perpetuating the power of the ruling class.

What I found interesting is that many visitors preferred the painting show—they simply got more out of it. Most visitors preferred painting because painting is a medium they understand to be unambiguously art. It made sense that this is what they would be drawn to in a contemporary art museum. I even overheard a visitor castigating the *Interventionist* exhibition as a show geared for art elites and rich people. Paintings were for the public and activist art was for art elites? It is in moments like these that I have to take a step back and think carefully about what it is exactly that political cultural production is doing. For, in the opinion of many visitors, forms that are unfamiliar and alienating can lead to a quick assumption that the museum belongs to a useless insider world that does not have their best interest at heart. The paranoia of seeing power is often a shorthand for dismissal.

At MASS MoCA, the public had misread productive ambiguity as a nefarious conspiracy. This is not, in and of itself, an unusual mistake to make. We live, after all, in a common ground of paranoia, and curiosity and veracity are its first victims. Frankly, the distrust of contemporary art is particularly acute. Perhaps this represents nothing more than the double-edged sword of

American democratic pragmatism, but often, politically geared artworks must nevertheless contend with a broad cultural suspicion that contemporary art is a genre for the wealthy.

While contemporary art in particular has a large mountain of suspicion to overcome, most cultural gestures must contend with the growing cultural attitude of paranoia. We are all familiar with the common use of skewed statistics and misleading information, with politicians and corporate elites routinely bending the facts to propagate whatever agenda they have. Thus, we find that after decades upon decades, spin, misleading commercials, and a general atmosphere of cultural coercion have produced a vast degree of psychological distrust. Without a shared sense of trust in basic tenets of plausibility, the entire project of empiricism dramatically erodes before us. Slavoj Žižek once complained that the United States predominantly remained a land of barbarians where most people believe in angels, but the fact of the matter is, most people have trouble believing in anything at all. In a land of paranoia, the metaphysical and the religious can at least save your soul. It is no wonder that religion continues to grow in popularity in a time when the project of the enlightenment has gained the reputation as the project of a conspiracy. On either side of the political spectrum we find a population increasingly convinced that there is a conspiracy of power against them. (And they are right!) We are dealing with a rapid dismantling of our capacity to trust what we hear, and in that wasteland we find the only reasonable outcome: radical paranoia.

The erosion of trust in an era of vast paranoia is of no small consequence. For what we are truly discussing behind the shroud of television, radio, film, internet and public relations is an ongoing war on meaning itself. If people can no longer trust what is being said—if they can summarily dismiss all points of fact—then, after a while, we find ourselves in a Tower of Babel moment. Politics and social life depend greatly on the capacity

to communicate, and the ongoing manipulation of meaning has begun to radically erode that bond.

CONTEXT AND ILLEGALITY

Seeing power is a form of reading an infrastructure—or, in more simple terms, a context. A street stencil of a young African American on a bicycle by the graffiti artist Swoon reads very different when placed on the walls of the Guggenheim museum than it does on a brick wall in Brooklyn. Indeed, it reads very differently in hipster-laden Williamsburg than it does in the predominantly African American neighborhood of Brownsville, both parts of Brooklyn. We all intuitively know that context transforms the reading of a work, but at the same time this basic fact tends to elude critical reflection.

This phenomenon is really not all that different from choosing to no longer support a band because it moved to a corporate label, or no longer trusting a certain person's ideas because of their new job, or no longer thinking a political artist is legitimate because she has begun to show with a commercial gallery. These considerations are not necessarily unfounded, though they may certainly be overdetermined. But they do allow us to see power as an integral component in reading an aesthetic. Divorced from the political economy that makes aesthetics possible, we ignore the critical infrastructures that provide its true meaning. We are getting less than half the picture if we conveniently avoid context.

Let's return to the graffiti of Swoon. What if the graffiti weren't on a wall in Brooklyn, but in a permitted graffiti space? We have all heard about moments when, in an effort to combat some growing graffiti crisis, a city decides to make a space where graffiti artists can legally do their work. A designated wall is produced where artists are encouraged to express themselves.

What this naïve civic attempt often ignores—and what is often integral to the conception of graffiti itself—is that graffiti is illegal. It marks the body of the city in a flagrant act of trespassing. When you see a tag, you know that that person committed an aesthetic act against the law. You read the law into the work itself. You're not merely seeing a tag on a wall: its existence is bound up in a set of power relations and its resistance to them.

When Abbie Hoffman titled his book *Steal This Book*, it was with a tacit understanding of just this very power. He wanted to position his words in a material relationship to the powers of consumerism. He wanted its legibility to resist its consumption. In a similar spirit, the Spanish anarchist group YoMango produced a fashion line by shoplifting clothes from chain stores, ripping out the tags, sewing in their own labels that read "YoMango"—which translates to "I steal"—and then handing out the clothes to the city's most desperate. This was Robin Hood as illegal artist—haute couture as redistribution.

Illegality as an aesthetic is just the most obvious in a whole range of interventionist and cultural acts that are keenly aware of their position in relationship to existing mechanisms of power. As opposed to institutional critique, which only makes evident the conditions of power, works of illegality and interventionism can actually enter into the juridical condition itself.

In 1986, in Berkeley, California, along San Pablo Avenue, a punk club named Gilman Street decided that it would no longer allow any bands that were on a corporate label to play their venue. The club would be corporate-free. With this decision, what was commonly understood to be punk rock had taken a fateful and critical step in the evolution of cultural production. After years of watching supposed punk bands preach radical politics only to head out to the massive arenas of sell-out heaven, Gilman Street positioned itself in opposition to this market-friendly trajectory. Rapidly, across the punk rock spectrum, bands began to take an anticorporate stand, tying

their music to a growing community celebrating grassroots, local-based culture. As Gilman Street founder Yippie Tim Yohannan stated, "What's important about punk rock is its independence of government and corporations and its network that exist outside of that. That is, what is political, not the words, not the music as much as the independence!"

Of course, this did not stop bands from selling out. Rancid, AFI, and Green Day are three of the better-known bands out of Gilman Street that went on to corporate fame. In fact, perhaps it is not surprising that Billie Joe Armstrong, Green Day's lead singer, hated Tim Yohonnan with such a passion that he actually wrote a ballad detailing his antipathy, called "Platypus (I Hate You!)," off their 1997 album *Nimrod*. And why not? In Yohannan's own perspective on what made things punk or not, Yohannan made a political claim. If you sold out to a corporate label, you were no longer punk. This surely ruffled the feathers of a band that couldn't help being self-conscious of just how publicly co-opted it had had become.

What Yohannan created—along with the large amount of volunteers and long-forgotten bands who helped out and performed and formed a community in that punk club—was not just a great place to hear and discover music, but also a physical site that linked aesthetics with a political position in relation to power. When punk music stepped across a certain corporate or statist line, it was no longer punk. Imagine for a second if one made such claims on cultural production.

SEEING POWER IN THE BECOMING COMMUNITY

I started this chapter in New Orleans, where Paul Chan's experience revealed how power can manifest itself not only from the top down, but horizontally across neighborhoods. Power, after all, can be distributed in numerous forms. A neighborhood

can often feel alienated and disempowered, but it can nonetheless contain constant battles for limited power that move across racial, patriarchal, and class lines. In order to produce a new community, we must thus not only consider inherent notions of privilege, but also attempt to see power from the position of those whom we are organizing with, and vice versa. It is not an easy task—it requires time, and unlike something static, collective power can shift via effective organizing models. In some ways, this is where the power of cultural practice can be truly radicalizing—when it works toward the production of self-empowerment in an infrastructure in the midst of transformation.

The same can be said for the coordination of a socially engaged artistic community. While the desire to police power could be extremely alienating, it is important for the collective infrastructure to be aware of how power can develop. Anarchists have long possessed a critique of hierarchy, and their numerous methods for instilling equality in decision-making can prove extremely useful for socially engaged artists: spokescouncil models for making group decisions, taking stock at discussions so that everyone has a chance to speak, instilling a value in a community that makes being aware of privilege (power) a necessary quality in good collective behavior. While it can seem individually exhausting (and time-consuming!) to install and hone systems that check power, we must bear in mind that not keeping power in check is considerably more devastating. For without a self-organized sense of how to make sure we are operating in equitable fashion, we can easily slide into producing the problems we are supposedly trying to solve.

Perhaps it is no wonder then that the uprising of Occupy Wall Street in September 2011 embodied so many of the tendencies we've articulated so far. The general assembly meeting style that began in Zucotti Park and spread rapidly across the United States embodied these anarchist, nonhierarchical working

models, which encouraged equal distribution of conversation and sharing. I do not mean to imply the method was idyllic by any stretch (the increasing scale of the park began to make these organizing methods laborious and, perhaps, in their own way exclusionary), but it did reflect an internal preference for more anarchist confrontations with power.

The methods of organizing at Occupy Wall Street also embodied an underlying suspicion of co-optation. OWS's refusal to make claims or demands was mystifying to the general public, the media, and a large amount of critics from the left who remained. A representative example from *The New York Observer* read, "The Wall Street Protestors: What do they want?" "What are you fighting for?" was the constant complaint leveled against the growing social movement littering the squares of the nation for a brief two month period. But the movement refused to be named, and it is my belief that one cannot understand this radical refusal until one appreciates just how intensely OWS sought to avoid its language being used against the movement in the court of public spectacle. The movement did not want to be tethered to any ideological framework. It didn't want to be roped into some pithy sound bite (though the media and many OWS members rapidly fixated on the "we are the 99 percent" mantra). In many ways, OWS was perhaps the first social movement whose strengths and weaknesses could equally be located in a healthy paranoia of co-optation and a zealous commitment to a utopian horizontality. It thus offered a new and exciting approach to seeing power.