

# **CULTURE IN ACTION**



## FROM SITE TO COMMUNITY IN NEW GENRE PUBLIC ART: THE CASE OF "CULTURE IN ACTION"

In the early morning hours of May 20, 1993, one hundred large limestone boulders, each about three feet tall and four feet wide and weighing roughly 1,000 to 1,500 pounds, mysteriously appeared on sidewalks, plazas, street corners, and parkways throughout the Loop in downtown Chicago. This odd and "spontaneous" outcropping of lumpy boulders on the streets of Chicago, each adorned with a commemorative plaque honoring a woman from the city (a total of ninety living, ten historical), was masterminded by Suzanne Lacy, a California-based artist best known for her feminist performances and protests from the 1970s. The event marked the unofficial inauguration of the temporary exhibition program "Culture in Action: New Public Art in Chicago." Sponsored by the nonprofit public art organization Sculpture Chicago<sup>1</sup> and conceived and directed by the independent curator Mary Jane Jacob, "Culture in Action" included seven other projects dispersed throughout the city at various neighborhood locations, all of which remained "on view" throughout the summer of 1993, from early May to end of September.<sup>2</sup>

Claiming to break from previous models of public art, "Culture in Action" took the entire city of Chicago as its stage and "focused on the active participation of residents in diverse communities in the creation of the artworks." According to its press release, "'Culture in Action' established a new vocabulary within the genre of urban-oriented sculpture exhibitions. . . . [It] tested the territory of public interaction and participation; the role of the artist as an active social force; artist-driven educational programming as an essential part of the artwork; and projects that existed over an extended period of time, not just as spectator-oriented objects for brief viewing."<sup>3</sup>

To do so, the eight projects included in "Culture in Action" were structured as community collaborations in which, with the help of Sculpture Chicago's administrative staff, the artist joined with a local organization or group to conceptualize



Suzanne Lacy and A Coalition of Chicago Women. *Full Circle*, 1993. (Photos by John McWilliams; courtesy Sculpture Chicago.)



and produce the art work. The results of these collaborations were wide-ranging and hardly the typical fare of public art. In addition to Lacy's commemorative boulders (which was only one of two parts of her contribution to the program; part two consisted of a ceremonial all-women dinner), there was a multiethnic neighborhood parade, by Daniel J. Martinez, VinZula Kara, and the West Side Three-Point Marchers (Los Desfiladores Tres Puntos del West Side); a new candy bar designed and produced in collaboration with members of a candy-making union, by Simon Grennan, Christopher Sperandio, and the Bakery, Confectionery and Tobacco Workers' International Union of America Local No. 552; an urban ecological field station involving twelve high school students, by Mark Dion and the Chicago Urban Ecology Action Group; a storefront hydroponic garden to grow food for HIV/AIDS patients, by the collaborative team of Haha—Richard House, Wendy Jacob, Laurie Palmer, and John Ploof—with Flood, a network of health care volunteers; a street video installation and neighborhood block party organized with teenagers from Chicago's West Town area, by Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle, the Westtown Vecinos Video Channel, and Street-Level Video; the production and distribution of paint charts that reflect the lives of public housing residents, by Kate Ericson, Mel Ziegler, and a resident group of Ogden Courts Apartments; and a telephone survey project on name-calling, by Robert Peters with "Mushroom Pickers, Ghosts, Frogs, and other Others."<sup>4</sup>

Initially conceived by Jacob in 1991, "Culture in Action" (originally titled "New Urban Monuments")<sup>5</sup> was intended to be a critique of two institutions: the organization of Sculpture Chicago specifically, and more broadly the field of public art. Jacob's assessment of Sculpture Chicago's 1989 summer sculpture program showcasing ten relatively traditional sculptures on urban plazas<sup>6</sup> was not altogether favorable. Like most public art organizations, Sculpture Chicago's stated goals included demystifying the creative process and taking art to the "man on the street." But its effort to do so by presenting the artists at work in tents set up outdoors—so that the public could have "access" to their "creative process"—seemed to Jacob still to maintain a strict and rather naïve separation between the artist and the audience, between producer and spectator. According to Jacob, the board members of

Sculpture Chicago were shocked to be told, "You're fooling yourself if you think that by seeing a sculptor weld two pieces of steel together, somebody has a sense of what art-making is."<sup>7</sup> In fact, Jacob's desire to shift the role of the viewer from passive spectator to active art-maker became one of the central goals of "Culture in Action."<sup>8</sup>

Lauded by some as one of the most important public art events in North America in the twentieth century,<sup>9</sup> and criticized by others for its exploitation of communities and/or reduction of art to a kind of inadequate and ineffectual social work,<sup>10</sup> this project's scale and ambition, and the discussions it generated concerning the definition and function of contemporary public art, remain unrivaled in the post-*Tilted Arc* era. But the symptomatic aspects of "Culture in Action," particularly in relation to the problematics of site specificity, are most evident when we compare the Chicago program to another public art exhibition of similar scale and ambition, "In Public: Seattle 1991." Organized by Diane Shamash, then the Manager of the Public Arts Program of the Seattle Arts Commission (SAC), "In Public" showcased eighteen installations also sited throughout the city (sixteen temporary and two permanent).<sup>11</sup>

With funds made available in 1986 through the Percent for Art program during the construction of the new Seattle Art Museum, SAC solicited proposals from thirty local, national, and international artists that would "address, intervene in, and engage the public life of the city." This kind of approach, seeing the entire city and its processes as a site for artistic intervention, was not new to SAC. Indeed, it was SAC's formulation of the architect/artist design team concept for the Viewlands Hoffman electrical substation project in the mid 1970s that set an influential precedent for the urban design approach to public art throughout the 1980s.<sup>12</sup> "In Public," at the beginning of the 1990s, was an attempt to reassess the wisdom of imposing architect/artist collaborative structures, which by then had become extremely formulaic and restrictive, on artists wanting to work in the public realm.<sup>13</sup> So with the exception of the Pier 62/63 collaboration between architects Henry Smith-Miller and Laurie Hawkinson and artist Barbara Kruger, "In Public" granted individual artists the opportunity to initiate and direct their own projects, in locations of

their choosing within the city, without necessarily having to collaborate with any design professionals.

"Culture in Action" made this feature a rule, eliminating the role of architects and design professionals altogether from the public art process. To a large extent, many of the stated goals of "Culture in Action" recapitulated the general terms of the Seattle program. "'In Public' was to be an experimental project that would push the boundaries of public art as we have come to know it and engage the public in a dialogue about the place and meaning of art in our daily lives."<sup>14</sup> But whereas "In Public" focused primarily on extending the types of public venue for artistic intervention, finding a broad range of unusual sites in and through the city (including newspapers, bus stops, piers, radio, television, as well as traditional public squares), "Culture in Action" abandoned the prevailing implication that architects and design professionals are expert negotiators between art and urban spaces. In effect, "Culture in Action" instead cast the "community" as the authority figure on such matters, privileging its role in the collaborative artistic partnerships forged by the program.<sup>15</sup>

Without question, what could be seen and documented as the outcome of "Culture in Action"—a candy bar, a neighborhood parade, a block party, a paint chart, a hydroponic garden, etc.—was in stark contrast to Chicago's own familiar forms of public art. Picasso's monumental cubist sculpture *Head of a Woman* (1965) on Richard J. Daley Center Plaza (also known popularly as the "Chicago Picasso"),<sup>16</sup> and the recent design of Pritzker Park by artist Ronald Jones (1991),<sup>17</sup> served as local prototypes against which "Culture in Action" established its newness and difference. Its difference was especially pronounced when one recognized that much of the work in "Culture in Action" was defined not in terms of material objects but by the ephemeral processes of interaction between the local participants and the artists. Furthermore, these interactions were not restricted, at least in principle, to the time frame of the exhibition itself.<sup>18</sup>

The 1993 presentation of "Culture in Action" thus exemplified on a grand scale what Suzanne Lacy defined as "new genre public art":<sup>19</sup>

Dealing with some of the most profound issues of our time—toxic waste, race relations, homelessness, aging, gang warfare, and cultural identity—a group of visual artists has developed distinct models for an art whose public strategies of engagement are an important part of its aesthetic language. . . . We might describe this as “new genre public art,” to distinguish it in both form and intention from what has been called “public art”—a term used for the past twenty-five years to describe sculpture and installations sited in public places. Unlike much of what has heretofore been called public art, new genre public art—visual art that uses both traditional and nontraditional media to communicate and interact with a broad and diversified audience about issues directly relevant to their lives—is based on engagement.<sup>20</sup>

“Culture in Action” affirmed Lacy’s claim that “what exists in the space between the words public and art is an unknown relationship between artist and audience, a relationship that may *itself* be the artwork.”<sup>21</sup>

The works in the exhibition also corresponded to what art critic Arlene Raven has identified as “art in the public interest.”<sup>22</sup> According to Raven, art in the public interest is activist and communitarian in spirit; its modes of expression encompass a variety of traditional media, including painting and sculpture, as well as nontraditional media—“street art, guerrilla theater, video, page art, billboards, protest actions and demonstrations, oral histories, dances, environments, posters, murals.”<sup>23</sup> Most importantly, she has argued, art in the public interest forges direct intersections with social issues. It encourages community coalition-building in pursuit of social justice and attempts to garner greater institutional empowerment for artists to act as social agents. Artists engaged in such art “aspire to reveal the plight and plead the case of the disenfranchised and disadvantaged, and to embody what they [the artists] view as humanitarian values.”<sup>24</sup> Additionally, they “demand more artist involvement in institutional decision-making, representation of

minorities and women artists, and use of the influence of museum and funding agencies to change government policies on social issues."<sup>25</sup>

Interestingly, the majority of those involved in such endeavors do not see their work within the historical framework of public art. Rather, they inscribe their practice—a contemporary form of socially conscious, activist political art—into the history of the aesthetic avant-garde. Raven, for example, cites Russian constructivism and the German Bauhaus as precedents for art in the public interest. She situates grassroots, artist-initiated activist groups from the 1960s (such as the Art Workers Coalition, Los Angeles Council of Women Artists, Foundation for the Community of Artists) as well as the alternative art movements from the 1970s within the same lineage, posing art in the public interest as a revitalization of the historical avant-garde's efforts to integrate art and everyday life.

Lacy likewise proclaims an alternative history for new genre public art. Disassociating it from the public art movement that developed through the 1970s and 1980s, she links it instead to the development of "various vanguard groups, such as feminist, ethnic, Marxist, and media artists and other activists . . . [who] have a common interest in leftist politics, social activism, redefined audiences, relevance for communities (particularly marginalized ones), and collaborative methodology."<sup>26</sup> According to Lacy, such interests lead to an attack on aesthetic categories bound to specificities of media, as well as the spaces of their presentation, and challenge the established criteria of cultural value based on aesthetic quality and individualistic notions of artistic competence. Thus, "draw[ing] on ideas from vanguard forms"—i.e., installation, performance, conceptual art, mixed-media art—new genre public art "adds a developed sensibility about audience, social strategy, and effectiveness that is unique to visual art as we know it today."<sup>27</sup> In so doing, it shifts the focus from artist to audience, from object to process, from production to reception, and emphasizes the importance of a direct, apparently unmediated engagement with particular audience groups (ideally through shared authorship in collaborations). According to Lacy, these artists, herself among them, eschew the constricting limitations not only of artistic conventions but of the traditional institutional spaces of their production and reproduction, such as studios, museums, and

galleries. They choose instead the “freedom” of working in “real” places, with “real” people, addressing “everyday” issues. In a move one critic has dubbed “postmodern social realism,” new genre public art also insists on a move away from the universalizing tendencies of modernist abstraction, to celebrate instead the particular realities of “ordinary” people and their “everyday” experiences.<sup>28</sup>

Foundational to this rhetoric of new genre public art is a political aspiration toward the greater “democratization” of art (a liberal humanist impulse that has always fueled public art). Qualities such as pluralist inclusivity, multicultural representation, and consensus-building are central to the conception of democracy espoused by the practitioners and supporters of new genre public art.<sup>29</sup> Rather than an object for individual contemplation, produced by a distant art specialist for an exclusive art-educated audience equipped to understand its complex visual language, new genre public artists seek to engage (nonart) issues in the hearts and minds of the “average man on the street” or “real people” outside the art world. In doing so, they seek to empower the audience by directly involving them in the making of the art work, either as subjects or, better, as producers themselves. By extending the hitherto specialized privilege of art-making and art appreciation to a larger number and broader range of people (not restricted to the privileged minority of the dominant class, gender, race, and sexual orientation), new genre public artists hope to make art more familiar and accessible (because it is now not only for the “public” but by the “public”). For the proponents of new genre public art, this ownership of art, or more generally cultural representation, is the basis for the integration of art and everyday life and a powerful force toward social and political change.

This effort to distinguish a “new genre” in public art might be approached critically as another form of aesthetic vanguardism, a renewed mode of social and political activism, or a new strategy of urban reform and revitalization. For some critics and artists, however, it represents neither a new movement in the field nor a newly politicized aesthetic sensibility, but rather a moment of arrival in which a well-developed mode of practice that had been undervalued in mainstream art finally receives broader cultural acceptance. According to Mary Jane Jacob, for

example, this "new public art is not so much a movement of the nineties, a new way of working, as a way of working that has found its time."<sup>30</sup> Similarly for critic Eleanor Heartney, the major shift in public art as represented by "Culture in Action" is not so much a radical turn in practice as it is a belated turn in institutional reception. Citing Kate Ericson and Mel Ziegler, who claimed that "art has the ability to be a valuable social tool" and described their art as intending "to be pragmatic, to deal with pre-existing social systems and to carry on a dialogue with the public," Heartney has written with some enthusiasm: "Of course, such concepts have been part of certain artists' thinking and practice for years. Now, however, they have come out into the open, becoming stock-in-trade for art administrators, curators and critics as well."<sup>31</sup>

Whether understood as the development of something new or as the institutional acceptance of something old, the ascendance of this category of public art represents a significant shift within the public art field. For new genre public art not only insists on a reconsideration of (public) art's values and priorities along with alterations in its methodology and procedures; it also asserts a major rethinking of site specificity as a means to achieve its goals. In fact, advocates of new genre public art devalue, or at times explicitly reject, received definitions of the site and existing approaches to site specificity. The self-proclaimed radicality of "Culture in Action" in particular, and by extension the rhetoric and practice of new genre public art in general, depends on a fundamental redescription of site specificity's aesthetic necessity, its conceptual parameters, its social and political efficacy. Strangely echoing the arguments posed against the earlier site-indifferent models of art-in-public-places and art-as-public-spaces, many artists and critics now register their desire to better serve and engage the public, to further close the gap between art and life, by expressing a deep dissatisfaction with site specificity.

According to art critic Jeff Kelley, for example, "site specificity was really more like the imposition of a kind of disembodied museum zone onto what already had been very meaningful and present before that, which was the place."<sup>32</sup> Kelley is concerned here to conceptually distinguish "site" and "place," the former signifying an abstract location and the latter an intimate and particularized culture that is

bound to a geographical region.<sup>33</sup> In associating the "site" with previous models of public art and "place" with new genre public art, Kelley means to highlight the limited social consciousness of site specificity as evidenced particularly in the art-as-public-spaces mode of practice.<sup>34</sup> At the same time, he registers the extent to which site specificity has experienced a radical reversal in recent years: where it was once a means to better integrate art into the spaces of the everyday, to better engage and accommodate the public, it has become a means to overrun the public and the meaningfulness of local places and cultures.

Such recent reassessments of site specificity, representing a fundamental rethinking of how an art work is to (or should) engage with its "public," turn on a crucial shift in which the "site" is displaced by notions of an "audience," a particular social "issue," and, most commonly, a "community." Artist Christopher Sperandio, for instance, speaking on behalf of the collaborative team of Grennan and Sperandio (one of the participants in "Culture in Action"), has unequivocally stated that they have abandoned the limited framework of the "site-specific" in favor of a more expansive notion of the "community-specific."<sup>35</sup> For Sperandio, the term "site" registers something neutral and implies a space that belongs to "someone else," i.e., an institution. A "community," in contrast, is apparently more specific and self-determined.

In a similar vein, Mary Jane Jacob has alternately described the projects in "Culture in Action" as both "issue-specific" and "audience-specific." According to Jacob, the move away from site specificity is a logical step toward a more intimate and meaningful relationship between the artist and his/her audience, a way of shrinking the distance between the traditionally separate poles of production and reception. "The commissioned works in 'Culture in Action' grow out of the alternative spaces and public art strategies of the 1960s. . . . They evolve as well from 'site-specific' artworks that, while tailored to particular locations, often remain discrete artworks within conventional exhibitions. In 'Culture in Action,' however, the artists' projects refer not primarily to sites, but to social issues that are of common concern to the artists and to the communities in which they have chosen to work."<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, "Each [project] is created in direct partnership with a local community and



addresses such urban issues as low-income housing, HIV/AIDS research and care, workers' rights, minority youth leadership, ecology, and women's achievements. Such temporal, issue-specific artworks are a form of artmaking that grows out of the desire of artists to reach audiences in ways that are more direct and unexpected than is possible in a museum or gallery setting."<sup>37</sup>

Critics involved in the current public art debate have offered various conjectures on the nature of these changes. Dan Cameron, for example, has described the shift primarily as a stage in the development of a particular artistic genre. For Cameron, "Culture in Action" and other public art programs like it exemplify the general transformation of sculpture away from site specificity toward "post-site sculpture," toward an increasing dissipation of art as a cultural category.

"Culture in Action" falls into the category of those sculpture exhibitions which have followed the logical progression from the model of site-specificity toward the apparent next stage: the dissolution of the language of "art" altogether, in favor of activities and interventions which take place directly in the community, away from the museum's watchful eye. . . . The work in "Culture in Action" set out to navigate that murky zone where social activism and post-site sculpture have begun to intersect.<sup>38</sup>

In contrast, Eleanor Heartney has characterized the current trend not so much as a logical progression in the development of sculpture but as a dramatic reversal in approaches to public art. Her argument positions the *Tilted Arc* controversy of the 1980s as a counterpoint to "the [recent] discussion [which] shift[s] away from the notion of site-specificity as a response to the formal dynamics of the site toward a concern with community as context." As she put it: "Before the construction of *Tilted Arc*, Serra announced that 'after the piece is built, the space will be understood primarily as a function of the sculpture.' Today, more often than not, the reverse seems to be true. Sculpture is seen as a function of the space or the context. Public artists

tend to speak in terms of community participation, temporariness and the limitation of the authorial role of the artist."<sup>39</sup>

This last comment is more in keeping with Jacob's own conception of "Culture in Action." According to Jacob, the trajectory of the modern public art movement, within which her program marks a major turning point, plays out as follows:

As public art shifted from large-scale objects, to physically or conceptually site-specific projects, to audience-specific concerns (work made in response to those who occupy a given site), it moved from an aesthetic function, to a design function, to a social function. Rather than serving to promote the economic development of American cities, as did public art beginning in the late 1960s, it is now being viewed as a means of stabilizing community development throughout urban centers. In the 1990s the role of public art has shifted from that of renewing the physical environment to that of improving society, from promoting aesthetic quality to contributing to the quality of life, from enriching lives to saving lives.<sup>40</sup>

Which is to say that, having lost its longstanding faith in the power of architecture and urban design to positively affect the quality of life in social terms, public art has reaffirmed its desire to impact the lives of (nonart) constituencies by other means. Instead of addressing the physical conditions of the site, the focus now is on engaging the concerns of "those who occupy a given site." These concerns, defined in relation to social issues—homelessness, urban violence, sexism, homophobia, racism, AIDS—ostensibly offer a more genuine point of contact, a zone of mutual interest, between artist/art and community/audience. The new formulation of community-based public art proposes a new partnership in place of the partnership between artist and architect valorized in the design team collaborations of the 1980s. The dialogue is now to occur between an artist and a community or audience group that is identified as such in relation to some social problem (which itself is often associated with marginalized and disenfranchised communities).<sup>41</sup>

The slide from site-specific to issue-specific in public art can be seen as yet another example of the ways in which the concept of the site has moved away from one of concrete physical location, as I argued in chapter 1. The invocation of the community-specific and the audience-specific, in which the site is displaced by a group of people assumed to share some sense of common/communal identity based on (experiences of) ethnicity, gender, geographical proximity, political affiliation, religious beliefs, social and economic classes, etc., can be described as an extension of the discursive virtualization of the site, at least to the extent that identity itself is constructed within a complex discursive field.

But the particular displacement of the site-specific by the community-specific in new genre public art requires special attention along a different trajectory of inquiry, because the prominence of community-based, participatory modes of art practice in recent years coincides with the frequent invocation of the community in many arenas outside the art context. Indeed, the community, generally understood as a collective body that mediates between individual subjects and society, has become a highly charged and extremely elastic political term. It is deployed equally by the left and the right to muster public support for certain social programs, political candidates, and legislative agendas; it carries weight in debates ranging from education and health care to housing policies and zoning regulations. On the one hand, the term "community" is associated with disenfranchised social groups that have been systematically excluded from the political and cultural processes that affect, if not determine, their lives. It defines coalitions of people seeking to counter such processes of exclusion and repression by collectively demanding equal rights, greater social recognition, economic support, and political power, such as the gay and lesbian community, the Asian American community, working-class communities, the African American community, women's groups, senior citizens organizations, etc. On the other hand, quite antithetically, the term is frequently invoked to describe departicularized identities of dominant social, economic, political, and cultural forces, such as the business community, the entertainment community, the medical community, the scientific community, the national and international communities. Furthermore, among neoconservatives the "com-

munity" is repeatedly conjured in efforts to instigate *new* exclusionary policies in housing, health care, social services, and education. In its drive toward the greater privatization of public institutions and services and the decentralization of state authority, the right has appropriated the concept of the community as well. The dismantling of certain state-sponsored social and cultural programs that especially benefit the poor and the ill, for instance, are carried out now in the name of community activism and community self-determination.

One example will suffice to illustrate the ways in which community-based rhetoric has become a flexible political tool for neoconservatives. In an article entitled "The New Community Activism: Social Justice Comes Full Circle," Heather Mac Donald describes the political struggles in the Lower East Side and the Upper West Side of New York City over the city's plans to locate in those neighborhoods new social service facilities for drug rehabilitation, mental illness, and AIDS treatment.<sup>42</sup> Detailing the opposition of a group of residents in each neighborhood to the city's plans, Mac Donald's narrative is marked throughout by her overriding concern to celebrate, as the title of her article indicates, a "new community activism." She begins her article with the ominous claim that "tolerance for the breakdown of public order under the banner of compassion and civil liberties is threatening the very survival of some New York communities." Against this perceived threat, she identifies "a new wave of community rebels who represent a revolution in the making. Citizens are rising to demand that the government stop dumping social problems onto their streets and start demonstrating a commonsense concern with the quality of life in the city's neighborhoods."<sup>43</sup> Thus, new community activism is characterized as a reclamation project—citizens taking back "their" streets and neighborhoods from both an inefficient government (the "therapeutic state") and those who constitute the social problems, who "gain money from the continued cycle of [state] dependence."<sup>44</sup> Rather than address the absolute necessity of social services for certain groups, Mac Donald writes only about the unfairness of social services being concentrated in particular neighborhoods.

For Mac Donald, the objectives of new community activism are twofold. First is the insistence that local communities, not government bureaucracies, have the

right to determine the use of neighborhood spaces, for social services or otherwise, and that the community should be able to "control deviant behavior" within its purview without government interference. In other words, the community should have exclusive jurisdiction over the management of the spaces and resources of the neighborhood and be free to police the neighborhood against "unwanted" elements, such as drug addicts, AIDS patients, the homeless, and the mentally ill. But the larger battle is ideological. For Mac Donald's community activism is not only against government interference in community issues; it is about "bucking a long political tradition . . . that champions radical individualism, disparages middle-class values, and reserves particular contempt for 'gentrification.'"<sup>45</sup>

In a hyperbolic rendering, the liberal left is characterized as dangerously radical and oppressively dogmatic, either too sentimental and idealistic, thus irrational, or too corrupt and unreliable to offer any satisfactory solutions to deal with many of today's social problems. This is why new community activists must reclaim the term "community" from its supposed misrepresentations and misappropriations by the liberal left leadership. According to Mac Donald, "When social-service advocates talk of 'community,' they are using a code word that has absolutely no reference to real communities."<sup>46</sup> Not surprisingly, Mac Donald's notion of the "real" community is based solely on ownership of property; those who own (or sometimes rent) housing and real estate in the neighborhoods are the only legitimate members of the "real" community who can speak for its needs, management, future direction and hopes. Consequently, the "real" community does not include or recognize the voices of others who might have contingent, nonproprietary relationships to the neighborhood, and it is delimited in finite rather than relational terms.

Much of the current effort of public art is in some measure a resistance to the strengthening forces of the right as exemplified in the case outlined above. In fact, participants in "Culture in Action" and proponents of new genre public art explicitly position themselves in opposition to such exclusionary tendencies. The highlighting of marginalized and disenfranchised social groups in community-based collaborative art projects is indeed an attempt to counter (if not compensate for) these groups' lack of social visibility and political power. And the endeavor to

give voice to underrepresented and disempowered groups, often by engaging them in the very process of creating their own cultural representations, is understood by most of its practitioners and supporters as not simply an artistic experiment but a strategy of political importance.

According to critic Hafthor Yngvason, for instance, who participated in the December 1992 symposium on "Culture in Action,"<sup>47</sup> the political implications of the shift from site specificity to a collaborative, participatory mode of community-based practice are profound.

As public art has developed over the last two decades, its emphasis has been on techniques of integration—not just to incorporate art physically into buildings and parks but also to foster social assimilation. While "site-specificity"—privileged in public-art circles as *the* public form of art—has provided a means to introduce art into neighborhoods without the glaring irrelevance of what has been called "plop art," it has rarely gone beyond the idea of responding to established ideas or "facts" about communities to participating in a public sphere where such facts can be examined and contested.<sup>48</sup>

Yngvason associates contrasting sociopolitical models with the "integrationist" and "participatory" modes of public art practice. Citing feminist political theorist Seyla Benhabib, he claims that the former is predicated on a vision of society as "'communities integrated around a single conception of the human good'—i.e., a conception that can be responded to in an unproblematic fashion and revitalized through simple design, such as a public plaza." The latter is based instead on a notion of society as "'marked by a 'plurality' of visions of what is good, and of the good of association itself.'" <sup>49</sup> For Yngvason and others, to pursue the kind of participatory art practice that "Culture in Action" advocates is not only to critique the "medieval" notions of public art (understood as a coherent representation of a community permanently installed in a public square or public gathering place) but to resist the integrationist ideology in a political sense.

To test Yngvason's hypothesis, that is, to examine more concretely the aesthetic shifts in new genre public art in relation to their political implications for the community, we will turn to the specific conditions of the eight projects in "Culture in Action" and of the exhibition program as a whole. A critical interrogation of their various mobilizations of the term "community" will serve to elaborate on the function of the concept within new genre public art as it appears to engage the larger political debate concerning the future of democracy.

It will become quite clear that, despite the efforts of many artists, critics, and historians to unify recent trends in public art as a coherent movement, there are numerous inconsistencies, contradictions, and variations within the field, even within the "Culture in Action" program itself. In fact, the narrative of new genre public art's newness, as developed in significant part in the promotional rhetoric and critical reception of "Culture in Action," has continuously obscured or glossed over some of its most consequential inconsistencies and contradictions. For instance, while the wide range of artistic media and formal approaches in "Culture in Action" has been acknowledged, even celebrated, as a distinctive attribute of new genre public art's aesthetic "freedom," as evidence of its "experimental" nature, the fundamental differences in the social and political implications of the separate projects have largely been ignored.

Contrary to its curator's overarching program description, the projects in "Culture in Action" each present a divergent approach to the central problem of community engagement. But the differences among the projects in terms of their visual presentation reveal little of their conceptual and theoretical differences. These are embedded instead in the specific (invisible) *processes* of their respective community collaborations, in their *enactment* of the necessary institutional and individual exchanges and compromises (as opposed to their rhetorical descriptions of them), many of which have been carried out in improvisational ways. We turn now to these processes and exchanges—the complex set of relations and negotiations within the particular parameters of "Culture in Action"—in order to pose the following questions.

In actual practice, how does a group of people become identified as a com-

munity in an exhibition program, as a potential partner in a collaborative art project? Who identifies them as such? And who decides what social issue(s) will be addressed or represented by/through them: the artist? the community group? the curator? the sponsoring institution? the funding organization? Does the partner community preexist the art project, or is it produced by it? What is the nature of the collaborative relationship? If the identity of the community is produced through the making of the art work, does the artist's identity also depend on the same process? How does the collaboration unfold, and what precisely is the role of the artist within it? Does the partner community coincide with the audience? If new public art engages the audience as active participants in the production of an art work, which to a degree renders them subjects of the work, too, then who is the audience for *this* production? What criteria of success and failure are posed now, especially to the artists, in this major reconfiguration of public art that moves aesthetic practice closer to social services?<sup>50</sup> And finally, through it all, what are the political implications and consequences of new genre public art's simultaneous displacements of the architect and the site (once understood as a geographic location) by the community, the audience, and the social issue, as themselves different kinds of spaces?

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The eight projects in "Culture in Action" can be grouped into four distinct categories based on the kind of interactions between the artist(s) and the respective community partner(s). The projects reveal varying degrees of intervention from the curator and/or Sculpture Chicago: some projects are fully dependent on institutional involvement; others are more able to oversee their own development. Each category also defines a different role for the artist, offering alternative renditions of the collaborative relationship. All in all, the variations among these collaborative models reveal the extent to which the "community" remains a highly ambiguous and problematic concept in public art today.



The first model is best exemplified in Suzanne Lacy's project *Full Circle*, with its hundred commemorative boulders. Here it is difficult to discern any community more particular than the social category of Women, despite the artist's effort to honor specific individuals from the city of Chicago. In preparation for the project, several committees of women were established by the artist and Sculpture Chicago to oversee the nominating and selecting of one hundred local women who would eventually receive a boulder commemoration. But the committees did not function as active creative partners in the overall conception of Lacy's project (at best, they were sounding boards for the artist's ideas). Instead, they were convened to perform and signify the decentralization of the artist's authority in defining the "content" of *Full Circle*—i.e., the names of individual honorees.

On the one hand, such a move seems logical, even commonsensical, as local residents would likely be more knowledgeable than the artist (from California) in assessing the social and cultural contributions of one of their own. On the other hand, Lacy's committee structure, employed as a means to humble the artist's voice and elevate those of local women, seems to confuse rationalized bureaucratization of the decision-making process with creative group participation. The artist's delegation of decision-making duties is not really the same thing as sharing of authority. Only those with authority in the first place are in positions to delegate; that is, the act of delegating is in itself an act of authority.

The committees, however, did infuse a sense of regional relevance to the project insofar as their focus was on Chicago residents. Lacy herself emphasized this aspect when she noted that "the invented nature of the nomination process grounded the project in the community and with the women selected."<sup>51</sup> This implies a locational delineation of the community. But what conceptually gathered all one hundred women into a coherent "community," or at least an extension of it, was not their common place of residence and work—the city of Chicago—or their presumed allegiance to it. Rather, according to Lacy, they shared a transhistorical, transcultural, and gender-specific "sensibility": "As the idea . . . grew, the issue that

seemed to connect them was service—and a sensibility, whether through culture or nature, that seemed particular to women. ‘Service,’ an inadequate word, often challenged throughout the project, still seems the best way to describe a quality of supporting, nurturing, correcting injustice, promoting equality.”<sup>62</sup>

Following this logic, Lacy orchestrated a conceptually coherent unity for all women, presumably identified with one another in the service activities of “supporting, nurturing, correcting injustice, and promoting equality.” Granted, the model of unity here was not that of a cultural melting pot, with particularities of minority constituencies effaced or assimilated into the likeness of dominant social forces. In fact, Lacy emphasized the distinctness of individual identities—one woman, one boulder—over the importance of a single collective image. She made a concerted effort in *Full Circle* to model a unity of women that encompassed a wide diversity of professional backgrounds, ethnicities, social standings, ages, and religious affiliations, paying special attention to the inclusion of underrepresented and marginalized groups, such as African American, working-class, and older women. But whatever the individual differences, all were subsumed in the end by the artist’s search for a common denominator that celebrated an abstract gender unity, delimited in this case by a set of service-oriented characteristics that were in effect naturalized as innate attributes of women in general. This was further emphasized by Lacy’s symbolic all-women dinner, which augmented the project.

Within such a framework, the specificity of each woman’s life drops out to a large extent (as does the specificity of Chicago), because diversity and difference are emphasized only to the degree that they can be overridden by a common principle or theme of unification. For example, the differences among the women in terms of their geographical attachments, socioeconomic position, cultural background, racial heritage, sexual orientation, and so on were absorbed by Lacy’s notion of “service”—without taking into account the different relationships (social, economic, spiritual, emotional) that each woman might have to the very prospect of “service.” Feminist social theorist Iris Marion Young has warned against reductive tendencies that would unite all women as nurturers and caretakers, especially when such characterizations are extrapolated into a gender-specific political vision.

Despite our [feminists'] critical attention to much of the male tradition of political theory, many of us have retained uncritically an anarchist, participatory democratic communitarianism to express our vision of the ideal society. Indeed, many of us have assumed that women and feminists can best realize this ideal, because women's culture is less individualistic and less based in competition than men's culture, and because, we claim, women are psychologically and politically more oriented toward care and mutuality.<sup>53</sup>

As the artistic impresario of *Full Circle*, Lacy rendered an image of community that is an overgeneralized and abstract projection of commonality, a *mythic* unity that gathers into its folds a range of particular persons and their experiences. While her version of community diverges somewhat from the traditional ideal of a completely homogeneous and coherent social body, diversity and difference are articulated here only to be overcome or exceeded by a universalizing common goal.<sup>54</sup>

### **"Sited" Communities**

The second model of community, perhaps the most prevalent in community-based public art today, is evident in the project by Simon Grennan and Christopher Sperandio and that by Kate Ericson and Mel Ziegler. In both cases, the artists paired with existing Chicago organizations, or "sited communities,"<sup>55</sup> that already had clearly defined identities in the sense of having established locational bases, modes of operation, or a shared sense of purpose. For Grennan and Sperandio the community partner consisted of members of the Bakery, Confectionery and Tobacco Workers' International Union of America Local No. 552. For Ericson and Ziegler the community partner consisted of representatives from the Resident Council of Ogden Courts Apartments. Being outsiders to the Chicago area, both artist teams required the assistance of, even became dependent upon, Mary Jane Jacob and the staff of Sculpture Chicago to provide local knowledge and access to

such specific community groups.<sup>56</sup> In the end, Sculpture Chicago was not only instrumental in forging these partnerships; it served as the indispensable mediator between the artists and the local groups, especially during periods of the artists' absence from Chicago (which was most of the time of their yearlong affiliations with "Culture in Action").<sup>57</sup>

The point of departure for these types of collaborative pairings is most often signaled by the artist's project proposal. More precisely, the dominant thematic concern of the project as defined by the artist, and interpreted by the curator and the sponsoring institution, sets into motion the search for the "right" match, the "right" community group that can best fulfill the particular goals of the project. For instance, Grennan and Sperandio's collaborative liaison with the candy-making union resulted from a long search by the artists and curator for an appropriate partner who could fulfill the artists' desire to produce an "interactive artwork involving a community of Chicago-area manufacturing employees in the development and



Simon Grennan, Christopher Sperandio, and the Bakery, Confectionery and Tobacco Workers' International Union of America Local No. 552, billboard design for *We Got It!*, 1993. (Photo by John McWilliams; courtesy Sculpture Chicago.)

marketing of a commercial product."<sup>58</sup> While Grennan and Sperandio conceded the need for further modifications to the project depending on the "specific nature and conditions of the hosting institution and workforce," the proposal specifically identified the outcome of the proposed collaboration—the production of a four-ounce chocolate bar, including its design and packaging.

In Ericson and Ziegler's case as well, the goals of the community collaboration, both in terms of material results and conceptual ambition, were established long before the engagement with any specific community group. In fact, in the preliminary outline for their project proposal dated June 14, 1992, months before a community partner was found, the artists described the overall configuration of the project in great detail.

As we discussed our project still consists of creating a "color chart" in conjunction with a group of tenants from perhaps one or a few federally funded housing projects around Chicago. . . . Our plan would be to work with this group of tenants over the next year and develop this chart with the convention of other paint charts in mind. It would be a usable paint chart, distributed in paint stores throughout the U.S. . . . The chart would deal with some specifics about federally funded housing, demographics, etc. It would of course hopefully raise issues that are of concern to the tenants but it would also question the validity and morals of the suburbs which these charts often cater to. . . . Anyway, the charts soul [sic] purpose will not be to sell paint and these details will work themselves out during our collaboration.<sup>59</sup>

Within this model of community interaction, the artists in effect specify their community partners—in the case of Ericson and Ziegler, "a group of tenants from . . . one or a few federally funded housing projects around Chicago." The curator and the sponsoring organization (here, Sculpture Chicago) function as middlemen in facilitating the partnership. The artists can either find themselves assigned to a

certain community group by the sponsoring agency or be given a list of groups to choose from. Thus, contrary to the promotional rhetoric that describes community collaborations as the result of an organic and dialogical relationship between the artist and the community, representing a set of mutual interests at the origin of the collaboration, the overall structure, procedure, and goals of the projects, including their conceptualization, most often precede the engagement with any such community. Jacob has claimed, for example, that "unlike other exhibitions of site-specific installation artworks that have merited recent attention, this project ['Culture in Action'] is the result of a fundamental collaboration among participating artists, community residents and civic leaders. This collaborative process has to an unusual degree shaped the conception as well as the realization of these artists' projects, and has led to a new dialogue between the artist and audience for public art."<sup>60</sup> But it is clear, at least in the cases of Grennan and Sperandio and Ericson and Ziegler, that the conceptual framework of the projects was fully articulated prior to any conversations with potential collaborators; the community partners instead came to fill the predelineated blank spots within that framework. The contribution of the community partners, in other words, was limited to the realization of projects that fully prescribed the nature of their participation in advance.<sup>61</sup> Elaborating on this particular point, many critics of "Culture in Action," in fact, have charged some of the artists, Jacob, and Sculpture Chicago with exploitation, even abuse, of local community groups.<sup>62</sup>

It is important to note in this context that Grennan and Sperandio informally proposed several different projects as viable options to Jacob, each proposal involving a different type of community group. According to Sperandio, it was Jacob who made the final selection among the list of six possibilities, in effect determining the project for them as well as proactively defining the community partner and the type of social issue that would be addressed by the project (in this case, blue-collar labor politics). This is again in contrast to Jacob's claim that the community collaborations in "Culture in Action" emerged organically through the initiatives of the individual artists working without specific guidelines or intervention. She has stated many times that the defining characteristic of "Culture in Action," including its test-

ing of interactive community collaborations as a new model of public art, came into being in response to artists' own interests in socially oriented art projects, and that she and Sculpture Chicago, acting as disinterested agents, merely accommodated the artists' wishes and followed their lead. However, correspondences and official paperwork concerning the early planning of "Culture in Action" reveal that this was not completely true. Jacob and Eva Olson (executive director of Sculpture Chicago) directed, even insisted on, certain types of collaborations as an important means to establish the exhibition's identity. They not only sought out artists who wanted to do community collaborations but played a central role in defining the nature of these collaborations.

Some view this kind of interaction between the artist and the curator/institution as a form of artistic collaboration in its own right (as Jacob continues to do).<sup>63</sup> And it certainly can be. But it can also be viewed as an example of the curator's increasing, though often unacknowledged, involvement in determining the parameters of an art project, a streamlining of the creative process that leaves the artist with what Mierle Laderman Ukeles has called the "curatorial assignment."<sup>64</sup> The fact that Sperandio was unwilling to divulge to the author the plans for other possible community collaborations "rejected" by Jacob, on the grounds that these proposals will likely be realized in other cities within the context of other exhibitions,<sup>65</sup> further reinforces the view that community "collaborations" are often artist-driven and curatorially directed. Despite the public foregrounding and rhetorical elevation of the community in the discourse, in such cases the specific community group seems to perform a relatively incidental role.

The exchange between Sculpture Chicago and Elaine Reichek, a New York-based artist who was approached for possible inclusion in "Culture in Action," helps clarify how the exhibition tried to define "community collaboration." Reichek's preliminary proposal, dated August 7, 1992, described a project in which she would produce a number of embroidered samplers and a set of bisque commemorative pots in an installation at the Chicago Historical Society. The content of the samplers and the pots was to highlight local Native American history, emphasizing the voices of Native American women, who would be contacted by the artist via

a local facilitator (Carol Becker of the Chicago Historical Society). These women's discussions of their personal histories and their thoughts on traditional museological representations of their culture were to be the basis for the content of the pieces in Reichek's installation.

Subsequently, attempts were made by Sculpture Chicago to forge a partnership between Reichek and a local Native American women's group led by Faith Smith of the Native American Service College, but without success. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Native American women questioned Reichek's proposal with some suspicion, requesting the artist, if she was truly interested in their lives, to spend more time with them on their turf to develop a more intimate relationship before proceeding to represent them in her project. Reichek's proposal, which assigned the decision-making and "creative" parts of the installation (the selection of content as well as the determination of the final form and the actual act of producing the pots and samplers) solely to herself, was deemed by Jacob and Sculpture Chicago to be at worst self-serving, and at best too inflexible to accommodate the needs of the potential community partners. Consequently, Reichek was disinvited to participate in "Culture in Action" in September 1992. In a letter written by Jacob to Reichek around that time, the curator explained that the proposal did not allow for enough interaction between the artist and the community organization. Or, more precisely, it did not allow for a particular *kind* of interaction that "Culture in Action" wanted to sponsor. Jacob wrote, "It is essential to the exhibition of 'Culture in Action' that artists develop a work out of a community dialogue and involve others in the 'creation' of these public works. At the moment, I feel like we are at a deadend. I admire your work but do not want to force a change when the idea may be better executed by you alone."<sup>66</sup>

This early exchange with Reichek reveals the general ambiguity surrounding the very idea of collaboration: does the "creation" of a work mean the actual physical labor of making an art object (or component parts to a larger installation/event), or does it mean the conceptualization of a project? This crucial question remained unanswered even at the end of "Culture in Action." There seems to have been an implicit division of labor in which the artist serves as the management



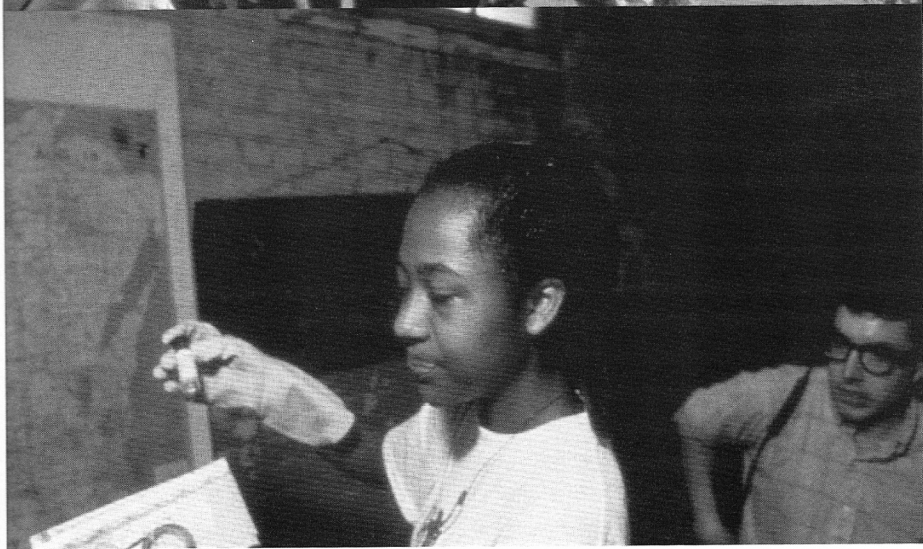
(conceptualizing and organizing) to the community partners' actual physical labor on the "production line." In any case, the incident with Reichek highlights Jacob's role in determining the type of collaborations that would be supported within the context of "Culture in Action," even if at times the rationale for her decisions seem vague and their results appear contradictory to her stated goals.

### **Invented Communities (Temporary)**

The third model of community interaction, exemplified in Mark Dion's and Daniel J. Martinez's projects, is one in which a community group or organization is newly constituted and rendered operational through the coordination of the art work itself. Also quite prevalent in current community-based practices, such an approach imagines the art work in large part as the effort involved in forming such a community group around a set of collective activities and/or communal events as defined by the artist. In Dion's case, the interaction was more or less based on a conventional pedagogical or educational paradigm. His Chicago Urban Ecology Action Group, which convened on a weekly basis during the one-year period of the artist's commitment to "Culture in Action," was set up as an extracurricular educational program with two local high schools. Dion functioned as the teacher/team leader of this special environmental study group of twelve students, whose activities, including a field trip to Belize, became synonymous with Dion's own artistic production.

Similarly, Martinez coordinated a new community group around/as his project. Named the West Side Three-Point Marchers, the group was composed of a network of members from several existing community organizations from the West Side area of Chicago (including school groups, community and religious centers, theater groups, neighborhood arts centers) who gathered for the single purpose of planning, organizing, and performing in a one-time event that Martinez envisioned for them—a carnival-like parade through three West Side neighborhoods on June 19, 1993. (This was one of two projects Martinez completed for "Culture in Action.")

In contrast to Dion's, Martinez's role in relation to the West Side Marchers was more like that of an artistic director, delegating certain logistical (and some-



Mark Dion and the Chicago Urban Ecology Action Group, *The Chicago Urban Ecology Action Group*, 1993.  
(Photos by John McWilliams; courtesy Sculpture Chicago.)

times creative) duties to others, akin to Suzanne Lacy's mode of operation. Martinez's overall conception of the parade as a public event on the theme of immigration history and identity politics, within which local African American and Latino residents would represent themselves (to themselves), was the driving force behind the activities of the West Side Marchers, and this activity defined their group identity. The actual labor of forging the cooperative liaisons between the members of the various local organizations, however, was accomplished not by Martinez directly but by two local women, Angela Coleman and Elvia Rodriguez, residents of two key neighborhoods (one predominantly African American and the other predominantly Latino), who also oversaw the preparations for the actual parade itself. Whereas Dion conducted his classes more or less autonomously in response to the stated and perceived needs of the students, Martinez did not live in Chicago and had limited direct contact with the people who would be involved in his project. This meant that he was not only dependent on the institutional support of Sculpture Chicago to make the necessary contacts but was fully indebted to the sustained mediation of local insiders like Coleman and Rodriguez. These women's interpersonal skills, their familiarity with the residents of the neighborhood, and their willingness to cooperate with Martinez were all indispensable to the successful presentation of the artist's work.

Even more than projects that engage "sited" communities, those involving invented community groups such as these depend a great deal on the administrative and institutional intervention of the curator and sponsoring agency. Of course, the latter's intervention and support can open up unpredicted avenues for an artist to develop his/her project. Dion acknowledged this in a preliminary public statement about his project, for example:

Why plan a project so complex that it spans several states and even countries and includes negotiating [with] organizations like The Belize Audubon Society, Arts International, The Brookfield Zoo, Providence St. Mel and Lincoln Park High School, World Wildlife Fund, The Department of the Environment, The Mayan Indian community,



Daniel J. Martinez, VinZula Kara, and the West Side Three-Point Marchers (Los Desfiladores Tres Puntos del West Side), *Consequences of a Gesture*, 1993. (Photos by John McWilliams; courtesy Sculpture Chicago.)

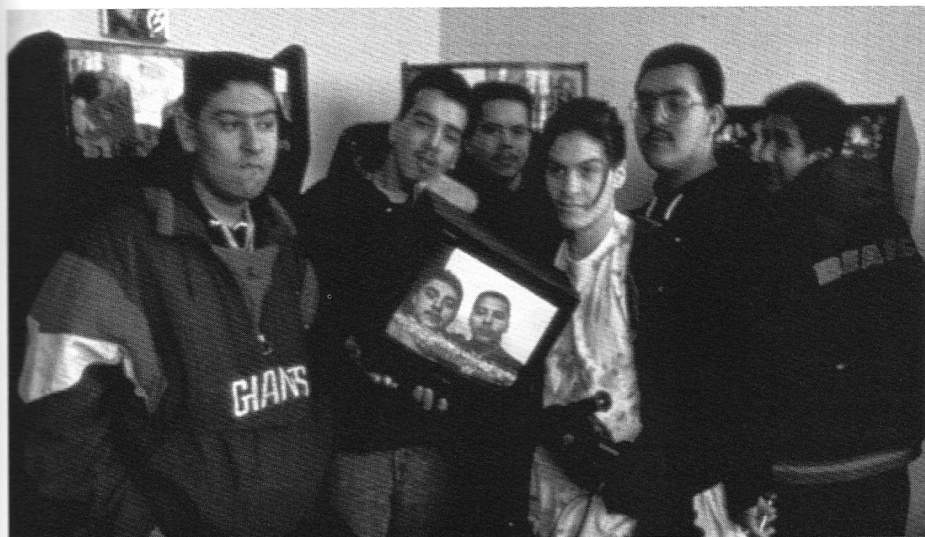
The Parks Department, The Belize Zoo and Tropical Education Center, The Field Museum, and the airlines? Why—at least partially because I've got the Sculpture Chicago logistics team from hell behind me and that knowledge has at least partially determined the realm of possibility for the project's scope.<sup>67</sup>

But this means that the logistical support can also foreclose possibilities for the project as well. Insofar as invented community groups are conceptually and financially dependent on the art project for their operation as well as their reason for being, they have severely limited life spans; their meaning and social relevance are circumscribed by its framework as well. Without the exhibition, their continuation becomes untenable in most cases. Indeed, the groups that organized around Dion's and Martinez's respective projects, while suggesting a model for potential development in the future (especially Dion's high school environmental study group), dissipated rather quickly at the close of "Culture in Action" in September 1993.

### **Invented Communities (Ongoing)**

The fourth model of community interaction is an offshoot of the third, the difference being in the community's sustainability beyond the exhibition context and its institutional support. Two projects in "Culture in Action," both (coincidentally?) by Chicago-based artists, fit this category. Haha—the artist team of Richard House, Wendy Jacobs, Laurie Palmer, and John Ploof—formed a volunteer group called Flood, dedicated to the building and maintenance of a hydroponic garden for the production and distribution of foods for AIDS patients. In addition, Flood transformed the storefront space in which the garden flourished into a kind of community center for AIDS education, networking with other health care organizations around the city to program weekly discussion meetings, public lectures, and special events.

Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle networked with existing community organizations and high school programs in his own predominantly Latino neighborhood in



Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle and Street-Level Video, *Tele Vecindario*, 1993. (Photos by John McWilliams, courtesy Sculpture Chicago.)

on friendships and neighborly familiarity, the groundwork for a sense of trust and a fluid, dialogical mode of communication was already in place. Haha and Manglano-Ovalle began, in other words, as insiders with what one critic has called a "home-team advantage."<sup>68</sup>

This advantage freed Haha and Manglano-Ovalle from the kind of institutional intervention or assistance that many of the other projects in "Culture in Action" required, including the need for intermediary, third-party insiders to communicate with the artists' respective community groups, especially in their absence. The advantage of continuous and consistent contact between the artist and the community group throughout the year allowed for greater trust among the participants, permitting improvisational and spontaneous reactions to changing circumstances around the project. Pragmatically speaking, these local artists were able to address daily problems and misunderstandings more quickly and collectively (not intermittently via long distance), better integrating the art project into the flow of the everyday life of the participants. Through such a relationship, the artists and the community groups enjoyed a greater sense of collective ownership of the project, predicated on their capacity to better control the processes of their collaboration, the unfolding development of the project, and their final public presentations.

However, sustaining these projects after the withdrawal of financial and institutional support from Sculpture Chicago was not an easy task. Haha and Flood had to relocate the garden with the expiration of their lease on the storefront space at the end of the summer of 1993, which had a profoundly destabilizing effect. They never fully recovered, although other volunteer activities besides the maintenance of the garden continued for many months. At the time of writing, there is talk of restarting the garden with the cooperation of a local church. Manglano-Ovalle and Street-Level Video had an easier transition thanks to the foresight of the artist. Typically, equipment such as cameras, television monitors, and editing machines are loaned to artists or art institutions by corporations for the duration of a public art program or event. Familiar with such arrangements, Manglano-Ovalle successfully negotiated *permanent* donations of equipment to found an operative, ongoing

video production studio. With the necessary equipment in hand, the participants of Street-Level Video were able to continue their work after the conclusion of "Culture in Action." The project exists in 2002 as Street-Level Youth Media, incorporated since 1995 as a nonprofit arts organization in its own right, with some of the original participants from 1993 serving as codirectors.<sup>69</sup>

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This is not to say that collaborations conducted by local artists are bound to be more successful or meaningful than those by artists from elsewhere, or that only local artists can create sustainable projects beyond the temporary framework of a public art program, or that sustainability in itself is intrinsically of greater merit. Certainly, the quality of the interpersonal exchanges between artists and their community partners cannot be measured in such terms. Neither can the value of non-collaborative efforts, which do not aspire to address social or political conditions directly. It is true that local artists have a head start in terms of their familiarity with their area of operation—its geographical configuration, its history, its available resources, its constituencies. But none of this guarantees the success of a community-based project, nor is a permanent project necessarily more effective or valuable than a temporary one. In many instances, it may be the outsider's perspective that provides the more cogent and incisive contribution or intervention into whatever community issues are at hand.

With the idea of an artist's "home-team advantage," site specificity reenters the discussion in a new way, as the sitedness of the artist becomes one of the central points of contention in community-based public art. For some critics, the success or failure of a community-based art project rests precisely on the artist's status as either a sited insider (= success) or an unsited outsider (= failure). But the process is far more complex than can be accounted for by such a formulaic reduction. To be sure, the artist's relationship to a group of people, a particular neighborhood, or a city plays a crucial role in the type of collaborations that are logistically and creatively possible. But in each case the particularity of this relationship—of the



artist's connection to the area and its people through geographical ties or past personal experiences—strikes a different balance in the triangulation (of power) between the artist, the sponsoring institution, and the chosen community group.

When the artist is from out of town, the sponsoring institution serves as a matchmaker and mediator, becoming the primary source of information and guidance for the artist. Sponsoring institutions like Sculpture Chicago, and their representative in the figure of the curator or artistic director, make the initial effort to introduce the artist to the potential local partner organizations, articulating to the latter the probable benefits of an artistic collaboration.<sup>70</sup> Often such an effort translates into selling a particular artist to a particular community group (usually by emphasizing certain aspects of the artist's exhibition history and his/her area of artistic interest), and vice versa. Even after a good working relationship has been established between the artist and a partner group, the agency continues to function as the conduit between them, helping balance the wishes and needs of the artist and the capacities and desires of the community partner.

In the case of a local artist, the artist usually functions as the primary point of mediation between the sponsoring institution and the community partner.<sup>71</sup> Whereas outside artists are most often associated with the institution (both are seen as outsiders to the community), local artists are usually identified with the community. Sometimes an artist will readily take up the role of community spokesperson. In other cases, the artist will function as a translator between the cultural realms of the art world and the local community group, shuttling back and forth between the two: here the *artist* performs the task of introducing or selling the public art agency and its programming agenda to his/her community partner group, and vice versa. In doing so, the artist engages in an ongoing process of describing and enacting his/her allegiance and commitment, constructing and maintaining a dual identity (as artist here, as community member/representative there).

Such a situation can leave the artist with a sense of isolation and estrangement in that his/her identity cannot be fixed to either side (there is always a remainder). But this is not to romanticize the role of the artist as a lonely outcast or to presume that the community and the art world themselves have stable identities. In

fact, the uncertainty of identity experienced by the artist is symptomatic of identities of all parties involved in the complex network of activities comprising community-based art, including the community, the curator, and the institution. And, of course, all subjects within this network are internally split or estranged as well, continuously negotiating a sense of identity and subjectivity through differential encounters with the other. But this does not foreclose the possibility of generative discussions between contemporary art and the needs and interests of nonart constituencies. In fact, this instability of identity and subjectivity can be the most productive source of such explorations. In the next chapter, we will review the most salient critiques posed to community-based public art in recent years to further explore the ambiguous discursive power of the "community."



