



**MICROUTOPIAS:
PUBLIC PRACTICE IN
THE PUBLIC SPHERE**

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was too sanitized and our interior life was not respected, understood, or made visible, they wanted to bring those subjective issues into the public arena. Later, as this interiority became the norm, artists continued to focus on what was still silenced—for example, sexuality, gender, and transgender—the complex emotions and sociology of identity.

Now many artists fear that the world has become too interior-focused and that private space and identity are all there is, even in the public arena. Most significantly, those personal issues are rarely linked to the greater social context that could help frame them, isolate their origins, and catalyze their resolutions. As sociologist Zygmunt Bauman writes, "...Public Space is not much more than a giant screen on which private worries are projected without, in the course of magnification, ceasing to be private."³ Public confession has become the norm, as we regress to a shame-based society. "And so," adds Bauman, "public space is increasingly empty of public issues."⁴ As artists take on these contradictions, their actions are not necessarily intended to challenge the art worlds of galleries and museums but, rather, to help reinvigorate collectivity and connectivity throughout the larger world.

They do this through the creation of microutopian communities—small locations of utopian interaction. Utopia, from the Greek *utopos*, meaning "good place" (as opposed to *oufopos*, meaning "no place"), is the creation of imaginary "good places" that do not exist on any map, other than that of the imagination. Such experiments attempt to create physical manifestations of an ideal "humanity" in an inhumane world—interventions in a world overrun by the spectacle. Even if their duration is brief, these interventions reflect the desire to give form to what Ernst Bloch might call "the not yet conscious," that which "anticipates" and "illuminates" what might be possible. And because utopian thinking is always communal, it has always historically implied the coming together of people within an imagined societal situation. (Therefore, you cannot have a utopia of one; an idealized experience with oneself would not qualify as "utopia" in the philosoph-

ical sense with which it has most often been employed.)

By asking her museum audience to sit with her in deep silence, Abramović created such a microutopian moment. Similarly, Tino Seghal, in *This Progress* at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, asked visitors to discuss the concept of "progress" with performers who greeted them as they walked up the ramps. As visitors approached the top of the museum, the age of the performers increased and the nature of the dialogue they initiated became less overtly philosophical and more narrative. These were interventions that engaged audiences in unexpected acts with an unspecified result.

Art is often a kind of dreaming the world into being, a transmutation of thought into material reality, and an affirmation that the physical world begins in the incorporeal—in ideas. Even Marx, the materialist, believed in the uniqueness of humans to imagine their world into being. He wrote that humans were better architects than bees and ants—the great builders of collective living—because they could see the plan before building it.⁵ In other words, we humans could "anticipate" what we would create.

Art is the great anticipator. It generates an "interpretation of that which is, in terms of that-which-is-not," as Rousseau might say.⁶ If one thinks that what exists is inevitable, then there is no space for art. This is why, in a very pragmatic society like the U.S., art is so often misunderstood. Yet, for that same reason, art is also so essential.

At this time, there is a collective understanding that, as John Muse wrote in an essay about Flash Mobs, "Everybody is an audience all the time."⁸ He adds, "Public spaces are more than ever becoming sites for communal isolation."⁹ Artists are both attempting to circumvent the spectacle and to reclaim urban space for the coming together of its inhabitants. They embrace diversity and resist the suburbanization of such space. But how do you bring people together to truly make a connection between them? Cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai asserts that the answer is microutopian. "We need to think of the biggest problems in the world," he has said, "and



Opposite Ramirez Jones reimagined the key to the city as a master key able to unlock: more than 20 sites across New York City's five boroughs including community gardens, corner stores, police stations, and museums, and invited the people of the city to exchange keys in small best-of-all circumstances (Photograph by Paul Ramirez Jones, Courtesy Creative Time).

come up with the smallest contribution toward their solution." It's a sentiment the artist Paul Ramirez Jonas has alluded to in work that has so often addressed both the interests, and the complexities, of the creation of "public."

What might we think of as the biggest problems and what might be the smallest solutions? Ramirez Jonas' 2010 Creative Time commission, *The Key to the City*, presented the following questions: How can we reclaim the centrality of citizenship as the most important element of society? How can keys to the city be available to all New Yorkers? And can this act of reclaiming the city be done in the most recognized public site of all—Times Square? According to written and spoken testimonies, the piece created a temporary community, as people waited to gift and to receive the keys. And it spread across the city, encouraging citizens to explore and experience greater access to one of the least intimate global cities in the world.

His newest piece, *The Commons*, is a heroic statue modeled after the bronze original of Marcus Aurelius atop his steed, located in the Campidoglio in Rome. But this horse has no rider, and it is made of cork, so that the public can use pushpins to leave notices for others, and watch it erode as the material deteriorates. The piece, which is ephemeral, collective, and historical, immediately reminded me of the *Polygonal Wall* in Delphi, where the ancient Greeks posted public messages in stone—the release of slaves by their owners, the amount of time a slave would stay after the decision of release, an inscription of gratitude to a benefactor, the record of a debt repaid. Private acts were recorded in the public sphere to last forever.

In Ramirez Jonas' act of creating the riderless horse, we have a perfect gesture for this historical moment. The unspecified rider—the completion of the heroic statue—can only be the public itself. Without the rider, the galloping horse has no clear direction, and without the public, the piece is incomplete. As Jacques Rancière would say, "The Spectator also acts..."¹⁰ Engagement is the only antidote to the spectacle. And the reinvention of public

space is the only antidote to its disappearance. Like Ramirez Jonas, artists have taken on the task of creating micro-utopian interventions that allow us to dream back the communities we fear we have lost.

Carol Becker first presented this piece as a lecture at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, April 28, 2011.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, *Selected Essays*, Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklinghaus, trans. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1984), 12.
- 2 Henri Lefebvre, *The Exploitation of Moments and the French Uprising*, Alfred Enghelard, trans. (New York: Modern Reader Publications, 1989), 7.
- 3 Fred Moten, *The Inhuman Condition* (Chicago, IL: Peep, 2001), 107.
- 4 Jack Zipes, "Introduction: Toward a Reclamation of Heterotemporary Humanism," Bloch, 2002.
- 5 David Harvey, *A Companion to Marx's Capital* (London: Verso, 2010), 112.
- 7 Adam Marciano, *Herbert Marcuse's Utopia* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1986), 38.
- 8 John H. Moore, "Thick Work's surf for the Urbanism of Audiences," in *Workday*, 40-3.
- 9 Fred Moten.
- 10 Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Gregory Elliott, trans. (London: Verso, 2008), 13.

Opposite: "The cork" version of Marcus Aurelius' steed created by Ramirez Jonas displays a variety of messages and pictures pinned on by the public. (Photograph by Paul Ramirez Jonas. Courtesy: Alexander Gray Associates.)

