

Where Possible Possibilities Are Possible: Experiences and Forms of the Possible

by Robby Herbst

On the final day of 2008, I cycled to a tree in Eagle Rock, CA. My riding partner in natty fisherpersons cap was Kelly Marie Martin. The trip took us ten miles, from her small house near smoggy downtown LA through an industrial belt surrounding the LA River, then finally, suddenly up a hill. This part of LA is filled with undeveloped hills surprisingly available for off-beat art projects. Breathing heavily, at the top we were met by a storm fence. We had to go around it to get at the scrubby chaparral behind.

We were told the tree was small and that it had a metal plaque at its base. From the fence, the flatland sloped gently through chopped grass and low shrubs to a dell filled with trees. Beyond that, the hillside continued wrapping around and out of sight. We hadn't planned on a scavenger hunt. Walking downhill, we didn't notice the police helicopter approaching, then banking abruptly, buzzing north thirty feet above our heads. Certain that someone had notified our trespass to LAPD, we panicked, then reasoned that if cops were on the way, time and reason were on our side. Not finding the tree, we took a breath, sat, and talked about the year to come, the year that had been, and also bicycles and the culture of bicycling.

LA is thought of as a car town. For the last several years, Kelly had been working hard at fostering the possibility that someone might actually think to take a New-Years-Eve-Day bike ride in Los Angeles to begin with. She participates in a project prophetically called The Bicycle Kitchen. Through tenacity, generosity, and an open spirit, the project's central image, a bike, has been a part of numerous, spaces, associations, events, restaurants, stores,

projects, radio programs, performances, and civic initiatives emerging in urban Los Angeles. The Bicycle Kitchen has helped to create a world of interactions and occurrences around bicycles. Insignificant among these was this adventure, bringing us on our late December ride to the baby eucalyptus. Eventually we located the tree and its plaque. It sat on the edge of a steep ravine shaded by larger eucalypti. The police never showed.

Except for two details, the tree is unremarkable. It looks planted (though it ain't) and cared for in the otherwise mature grove. The tree's keeper is organizer Lara Bank. Then there's the plaque itself declaring Tree and Space and the URL treeandspace.org. Lara created Tree and Space in January of 2008, as an extension of her onsite, yet equally anti-materialist, indoor space called Sea and Space. The tree, you are told if you check the URL, is to function as a stage for any performance that happens to take place near or around its branches. When Lara first planted the tree it was a pine, but that died. So an oak was planted, but that died. Now, the eucalyptus, although not a native species, appears hardy. The website also offers this:

"A space defined by a tree planted to serve as a location for public art practices. It is unregulated and open to all to utilize. A brass marker is placed on location to aid in tree identification. Anyone can perform or do an artwork at the tree."

On Kelly's suggestion, we each plucked and pocketed a leaf from it. These leaves accompanied us for an early dinner of Mexican huaraches and then mellow bike rides home. It's in my wallet still: green and sandwiched between the folds.

Before leaving the hillside with the eucalytus, I took a moment to stare out across the valley with the freeway over to the San Gabriel Mountains with the sun setting over it, on that last day of 2008. I thought on the year that I hoped would meet me in 2009 – the people I would know – how they might influence me and I them – the changes that I and the world would experience and how we all would face the unknown future. And then I tried to authentically feel the metaphor that I am hoping to construct for you here: which is the full extension of the space defined by the context of tree down the hillside into the city up to the mountains and down the ocean and over the country and the water to envelope the entire world, with the tree at Tree and Space at the

very center, and around it unregulated performances happening with the tree as an un-absolutely necessary aid to finding them, to locating the possible permutations of experience that might be had, regulated and unregulated by time, space, and the laws of people, nature and the universe. The tree stages possible shapes and is shaped by infinite possibility.

A partial list of possible titles available on amazon.com

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Are Other Worlds Possible?
A Movement of Movements: Is Another World Really Possible?
Another World Is Possible.
Realm of Possibility.
The Politics of Possibility.
Realizing the Impossible: Art Against Authority
Possibilities: Essays on Hierarchy, Rebellion, and Desire
All Possible Worlds: A History of Geographical Ideas
Zapatistas: Making Another World Possible
Workers' Control: Another World Is Possible
Another World Is Possible: A Manifesto for 21st Century Socialism
Another World Was Possible
Alternatives to Economic Globalization: A Better World Is Possible
Another Dinner Is Possible
Another Production Is Possible
Impossible Will Take a Little While, A Citizens Guide to Hope In a Time of Fear

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Tree One Planting: January 24, 2008 | For *Tree and Space* Artist: Lara Bank

I am interested in the phenomenology of open-ended generative practices – alternatively labeled “social art and activism.” Both the problem and benefit of possibility is there is so much of it that it gets away from you. For the last year, I’ve been locating activities that explicitly or indirectly aim to generate other things, in order to try to gain a hold of this elusive way of being.

Possibility infers something other. Specifically, in general it is a useful term because it doesn’t add up to or necessarily even promise all that much, though it could. It’s not saying “Fish” nor is it saying “cut bait;” it’s not saying “state-sponsored socialism” nor is it saying “corporate-sponsored kleptocracy.” It’s not even saying a “new puddle of mud.” It’s saying all these things and none of these things – but perhaps not. Anything is possible, really. And perhaps this is the point. Possibility insists that there might be things out there. It may be the options directly on the table or it could be something wholly different. Possibility presents itself simultaneously as both pornography and alien. We will understand it when we see it, or we just won’t.

It emerges at a time when people are looking for different ways to be with one another and the planet. As such, you can read about it in texts regarding both social art and anarchism. Both disciplines employ models of person-to-person sharing that let context, not received truth, determine understanding and outcome.

The artwork is presented as a social interstice within which these experiments and the new “life possibilities” appear to be possible.

- NICOLAS BOURRIARD, *RELATIONAL AESTHETICS*

In 1998, Nicolas Bourriard coined the term “relational aesthetics,” in a book of the same name, to describe artwork with a long lineage that came to his attention in the mid 1990s. For some, the term has stuck. In his writing, Bourriard portrays a situationist’s sensibility in describing an art practice that “arises from an observation of the present.” Detournement is less the goal of the institutionalized artists’ projects that Bourriard describes, but rather the creation of situations. And as a quasi-situationist, Bourriard premises that these “space-time elements” or “interhuman-experiences” create models of living beyond the confines of failed utopias and languages of “calls for better worlds.” As if artists in museums and galleries where alchemists stumbling upon the future through the creation of formal experiments between themselves and publics.

Art-wise, Bourriard wishes to talk about formations rather than forms. This is because he sees relational practices as natural extensions of art’s discursive purpose. Art is an encounter between an artist and a form, then a public and that form. As a pivotal part of the looped information cycle, the open-ended art creates a pivotal conversation between the artist, his mediations, the public, and a final and ever-moving meaning.

I suggest that we need to think instead of the coming communities in the plural, but not in the form of liberal pluralism, and that we need to guide our relations with the other communities according to the interlocking ethico-political commitments of groundless solidarity and infinite responsibility.

- RICHARD J. F. DAY, *GRAMSCI IS DEAD*

In the book *Gramsci Is Dead: Anarchist Currents in the Newest Social Movements*, Richard J. F. Day describes a contiguous project of activists to cultivate another world outside of galleries and museums. Power and the concept of hegemony (the ability to represent and maintain the illusion of power) is suspect with Day’s conception of anarchism. According to Day, as new forms of art refuse to be set within finite and definitive objects, new anarchist methods proceed by removing the coercion of fixed terms from their practices.

Working genealogically and through affinities, anarchists have developed practices between people in highly contextual situations. These frames of encounter, developed as organizing tools by anarchists, have coalesced in forms of social organization that prefigure situations other than capitalism or communism. Day argues that, working in the manner of open and groundless solidarity with open infinite responsibility, anarchists have been able to develop possibilities beyond the logic of both capitalism and Marxism from the everyday. Is this alien space?

The international of hope. Not the bureaucracy of hope, not the opposite image and, thus the same as that which annihilates us. Not the Power with a new sign or new clothing. A breath like this, the breath of dignity. A flower yes, the flower of hope. A song yes, the song of life.

- SUBCOMANDANTE INSURGENTE MARCOS,
MEXICO (JANUARY 1996)

Photos: Leslie Furlong



A) Clarence Ridgely had been thinking of gardening. While surfing the Internet, he serendipitously came across a call from an artist, Fritz Haeg. Fritz was looking for a homeowner interested in tearing up his or her front lawn to replace it with a vegetable garden. (Fritz is a Los Angeles based artist who implements platform-projects that can unfold at any site, provided there are responsive operators). Open to the idea, Clarence, with no ambitions other than to receive help with his garden, applied. He was selected. The front yard of his brick-porched white colonial home became the prototype "Edible Estate" garden for Baltimore, Maryland.

Clarence's neighborhood has both the feeling of faded suburban grandeur and suburban ennui: stately homes from early 20th century, boulevard streets, driveways, all clearly built for first-ring commuters and their Model T's. The savannahs of grass lying between sidewalks and front steps sit silent except for swinging doors and occasional whines from construction tools. In contrast, Clarence's yard on a not-yet humid July morning is bursting with mounded vegetables, herbs, and insects. He stands tall to meet me, his lawn now a productive landscape. He visibly enjoys being in his garden. He's had folks from the museum, including Fritz, out to help him. He went to town for the opening there, too. Mostly, though, he's here among the blueberries.

Far beyond the provenance of the LA artist, during the course of my conversation with Clarence the following events transpire:

1) A car approaches, lazily slows down, honks its horn. Driver waives to Clarence, drives on. 2) A large, threatening dog bolts from its walkway across the street into Clarence's garden. Thankfully, he runs playful circles around us, dashing about the beds as if its tongue were wagging with the bumblebees. 3) The dog's owner ambles over. Taking him by the collar, the guy and Clarence chat in that neighborly way. Without asking, and clearly not expecting to be, he snaps several red tomatoes from the overloaded vines. He walks himself, his dog, and the tomatoes back across the street, presumably to his own kitchen.

Next summer, perhaps he'll plant a front yard garden with Clarence's guidance.

B) The Junior Ambassador is a red funky food cart on an empty and unremarkable lot on a youthful street in Portland, Oregon. It's also a portal to the nation of Mostlandia. Mostlandia was discovered by an artist group known as the M.O.S.T. The collective once functioned as bureaucrats for the island nation but is defunct. Today the only way to access Mostlandia is through the Junior Ambassador. In back of the cart, beyond the outdoor seating area, you'll see a garden that directly mirrors the landscape of Mostlandia. Otherwise you won't see much otherness. But if you ask Rudy, the Junior Ambassador who operates the cart, why things seem just a little off, you'll find that the Junior Ambassador serves Mostlandian Cuisine. It consists largely of panwiches and odd flavors of ice cream.

The Caprese Sundae has all the ingredients of a Caprese Salad, except in another form. The mozzarella cheese becomes ice cream, the balsamic vinegar is cooked to a reduction standing in as hot fudge. The jimmies are shredded basil leaves. Visually, the thing is a wonder: a hot-fudge sundae with lime green sprinkles. You can't imagine how the concoction will come together in your mouth. Cheese vinegar ice cream?

The afternoon I visited the Ambassador, I purchased the sundae, as did a second customer; we sat at the same bench to eat. While I approached dessert with suspicion, she, after pausing briefly to acknowledge it, dove right in. A big smile lit her face - her forehead broadened - visually an idea crossed her brow. Before I could say "What?," she looked up, grabbed the salt and pepper shakers from the table, and sprinkled both on gently melting white ice cream. Missing a beat to make the same leap of logic that she'd made, I followed suit. Salted ice cream. It tasted brilliantly! We chuckled together at what we'd experienced here in Mostlandia.

activists in the RNC Welcoming Committee believed they had set up an ethical framework to potentially generate the creativity of indescribable multitudes, law enforcement saw a possible threat to power and authority, and dealt with it harshly.

Elsewhere in the Twin Cities, within a slate tiled Peavey Plaza, miles from the police state surrounding the convention, near the Minneapolis hotels of the Kansas and Illinois delegations, light rain dripped from an improvised tent. Artist group Red 76 had set up a grill, offering food to anyone interested. Watermelon and ripe tomatoes and hamburgers placed on paper plates provided the impetus for a pleasant and open-ended conversation directed by Sam Gould of Red 76. Citizens, hotel workers, veterans, errant delegates, and reporters sought refuge in this generosity. The table was framed by a simple hand-lettered poster asking "How has the war affected yr. day to day?" I am unsure if this art event served as a counterpoint to confrontations that played out in downtown St. Paul. Does attempted insurrection compare with what was essentially a tea party?

At the end of Red 76's lunch, one of its soft-spoken facilitators, Mike, deemed it a success. He said, "I got rid of all the meat I brought to barbeque. There were no dominant voices. People felt comfortable to keep moving the conversation along in different trajectories. They stopped to let other voices in."

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The structure of the possible is something that we are familiar with: non-hierarchical, improvisatory, designed to be used by another, generative of experiences. That these experimental platforms have produced outcomes beyond their origins is one of their pleasures. Cycling, and cycling together, is chic in Los Angeles. Having never talked to Fritz Haeg, gardeners in Texas, Wisconsin, and Washington describe themselves as a part of an edible estates movement. An open-ended dinner/art event in Baltimore, MD (facilitated through a group that came to be known as Camp Baltimore) is credited with revitalizing both a bookstore and solidarity between previously disconnected urban activists. In the Oriels' Camden Yards, stadium workers are said to have a more just contract partly through this. Those dinner conversations have directly generated an urban farm, a local newspaper, a free-store.

As creative successes within mostly improvisatory situations are tenuous; as reforms are the proviso largely of deep-pocketed institutions; as policy is frequently irrelevant in economically starved civic-spaces; as democracy is largely ossified into abstract ritual; as mechanisms of digitized industry replace rituals of flesh-to-flesh experience; as people's power is marginalized by a corporate state's defensive strategies; as life becomes harsher and more barbaric, proscribed by economic limitations; as competition is the naturalized posture of culture; as social capital is the only sorts of wealth that people are able to rely upon – there is always the possibility for something other. Whether or not artists and activists can rely upon these frequently open-ended and occasionally aesthetic happenings to accomplish the goal of recuperation or change is an open-ended question. ♦