



Domestic Happenings

Dustin O'Hara

"In the exchange that follows, both the artist and his or her collaborators will have their existing perceptions challenged: the artist may well recognize relationships or connections that the community members have become inured to, while the collaborators will also challenge the artist's preconceptions about the community itself and about his or her own function as an artist. What emerges is a new set of insights, generated at the intersection of both perspectives and catalyzed through the collaborative production of a given project."

— *Conversation Pieces, Grant Kester*

In the spring of 2009 I spent three months collaborating with Art and Tina McLean. Married for some twenty years, Art and Tina met by playing in a band together. The band broke up but they stayed together to form a family. During our brief period of collaboration we met twice a week, the first six weeks were spent exploring their personal archive of home movies, photos, and audio recordings. We had many discussions about their life together, about what's important to them and how that has changed over the years. We curated this material onto a website, including narrative essays they wrote about their life. Eventually our efforts coalesced into a video installation, a video portrait made visible to the public through the two front windows of their home. The installation was accompanied by a day of barbecuing and live music. The event became a family reunion of sorts, Art had a couple brothers he hadn't seen in fifteen years, their daughter flew out from New York, cousins from Seattle, and old friends from across California. Neighbors came over and met each other over cold beer and hamburgers. The McLeans and their friends played music in the drive way. With framed photos along the side of the house the gathering became an ad hoc memorial for one of their former band mates who had died. The event took on a personal momentum of its own. Later that weekend we sat around discussing what had happened, and what it meant to the family. Micheal, their son, brought up the fact that they were a very musical family but had never played together until then. He asked "why?" and none of us had a satisfactory answer.

What has been identified as social practice, is a response to a general skepticism surrounding conventional notions of how creative practices are supposed to operate in the world, and what masters they serve. Increasingly we see practices that are either consciously retooling their mode of operation, or efforts that are struggling to create systemic models and institutions that can facilitate the reality they want to bring into the world. Such strategies have a long opaque history, often with the pragmatic agenda of enacting some kind of alternative modes of being. From an educational perspective, we might ask, what does professional success in the arts look like? And what are the critical skills and methodologies needed to refine these emerging models? As my mentor and friend, Fabian Wagmister, might say: "To be radical now, is to create within a real social context."

Human creativity does not exist within rarefied spaces but rather within the habits and struggles of daily life. A lesson so obvious it's almost painful to imagine people thinking otherwise. But such thoughts of rarefied genius were the outgrowth of a long history of conquest, of both body and mind, that rendered a very particular notion of progress. If structural resistance is at all possible, it will surely be rooted in cultural forms of local invention. I don't think I'm alone in finding little to no hope in national politics or large scale institutions, rather I find hope in the desperation of human creativity.

The territory we are currently trying to understand is the dynamic range between cultural and civic expression, and how these two can have a more explicit and meaningful relationship. How do we rethink democratic mechanisms? How do we repurpose the tools we have available for modes of agency that can blur the boundary between work and play? From an art historical perspective much of this thinking can be linked to conceptualism and the dematerialization of art, but now it is a matter of materializing both the creative and civic infrastructures that will make a real economy of human scale and human value possible.

Currently I am interested in examining domestic space, an institution that has long been overlooked. From an architectural/design perspective domestic space has a history that is intertwined with class and gender inequities. Quite literally Victorian homes were designed with specifically gendered rooms, as well as hidden hallways for servants.



Photograph by Art and Tina McLean

While most of these design strategies emerged within upper class households, their ideals translated to middle and working class homes. With the development of a modern economy the notion of home, domesticity, and the wife's (or servant's) place in making it all happen was articulated in numerous best selling publications. Such literature simply reflected the ideals and practices that normalized a patriarchal society. While the structural qualities of domestic space and its history can not be overlooked, there is also a story of radical pioneers, of homesteaders, and of crafting as an integral part of normal social functions. It is a working class aesthetic, an aesthetic that goes contrary to our popular notions of leisure. . . this is the story of participation.

In an attempt to engage with these ideas while having fun, we are developing a residency program that connects households interested in hosting an artist with artists that are interested in collaborating on a project that is somehow relevant to the household member's immediate daytoday lives. At the moment we are imagining the residencies lasting more or less a week long depending on everyone's availability. Each residency has some kind of concluding presentation or gathering. As part of the matching process interviews and other forms of documentation will be produced. The project in its entirety is being framed as my MFA thesis project and possibility as part of the emerging UCSC research center for art as social practice. I'm highlighting these institutional affiliations to make transparent the various contexts that this kind of work is operating within – and to consider the limitations and possibilities inherent to such spaces. In the most broad sense the residency project is a gesture of speculation, an open ended question about the home as an incubator of everyday creative practices. And from a political perspective it is about highlighting the domestic economy as an engine of recognizable value.

But what constitutes value? And what are the means of recognition? While we could talk about economic theories of value, usevalue, exchangevalue, labor value, I'd rather opt for a more esoteric description of value as being analogues to knowledge and memory, and the production of knowledge expressed through material forms and gestures. Such an epistemology is always site specific, operating within a spatial system of relative positions. Recognition is then the emergence of place within the spatial system, a point of arrival and departure, in an economy of both material and conceptual terms. There is both an empirical and poetic quality in how this is practically expressed. Quite literally the same foundational systems we are using to navigate from point A to point B are also a means of organizing our personal memories of holidays and adventures, and aggregating a common knowledge that was previously not available. Such a mediascape operates as both a cultural platform and a civic infrastructure that is increasingly connected to nearly every person and home. The recognition of domestic space as an engine of value is not about homesteaders getting their fifteen minutes of fame on a reality TV show, but rather about the integration of participatory systems that can facilitate the negotiation of shifting attitudes, hostilities, and misunderstandings for those communities interested in new democratic possibilities. But this is hardly about technology, it is about the choices we are making and the world we want to build.

Notes:

¹ John, Dewey., *Art as Experience*. New York: Perigee Trade, 2005. Print.

² John, Dewey., *Democracy And Education*. New York: Free, 1997. Print.

³ John, Dewey., *Experience and education*. New York: Touchstone, 1997. Print.

⁴ Kester, Grant H. *Conversation Pieces Community and Communication in Modern Art*. NY: University of Cal, 2004. Print.