Jesús Palomino, *Vendors and Squatters*, 2003, courtesy of photographers Francisco Barsallo & Miguel Lombardo.

Making the Invisible Visible: A City in Multiples and the Art of Multiplicity

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Introduction

The current climate surrounding contemporary art production—including recent curatorial and exhibition practices—is especially marked by an ongoing expansion of the field across disciplinary boundaries and beyond the conventional spaces of display and reception. This expanding field of artistic production spreads in multiple directions, an expanding universe without any definite center or edge. One facet of this expanding field concerns the arm of contemporary art production today that takes the very nature of human relations as the source material for the undertaking of a project or research initiative. In doing so, artistic processes are combined with social processes of transformation through the "making visible" of that which is otherwise invisible: that is, the very socio-politico-economic tensions and power relations that organize societal life, as well as the "invisible" people within society, the marginalized and/or disenfranchised.

Many projects of socially engaged, collaborative art are highly complex systems that entangle both aesthetic and socio-politico-economic issues. These kinds of practices often speak to diverse groupings of people, who—while deeply interconnected—may or may not have access to the necessary socially, culturally or politically viable opportunities for the articulation of their personal views and concerns, their own subject positions. This type of working process—layering aesthetic and sociopolitical issues; employing open-ended, dialogical modes of production; testing the very publicness of the spaces in which the work permeates—requires a kind of artistic and curatorial prowess that focuses on notions of collaboration, representation and improvisation. Yet, the very mutability of these practices does much to dissuade the use of oversimplified categories and concepts, and without sufficient tools (theoretical or practical) to measure and gage their multiple values and points of reception, analysis can often lead to a reduction of the works to a single dimension or create a misleadingly narrow critical framework.

In order to avoid the numbing effects that accompany the use of generic terms—the pitfalls of overgeneralization—I will take a moment to further explore the concepts of collaboration and representation in the hopes of reactivating them within the context of this analysis. My interest in collaborative processes extends far beyond merely the definition of two or more people "working together." This is a rather mundane interpretation and does not convey the sense of reciprocal activation—processes that create

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1. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2001).

2. Minna Henriksson, "The World Can Be Transformed by Action," 9 International Istanbul Biennial, http://www.iksv.org/bienal/bienal9/english/?Page=Curators&Sub=Interview&Content=4.

3. Claire Doherty, "The New Situationists," in *Contemporary Art: From Studio to Situations* (London: Black Dog Publishing Ltd., 2004), 8.

4. Gerardo Mosquera and Adrienne Samos, "Riding on a Wild One," zingmagazine, http://www.zingmagazine.com/issue19/mosquera.html.

5. Adrienne Samos, email to the author, March 26, 2009.

6. The list of international artists included: Francis Alÿs & Rafael Ortega, Ghada Amer, Gustavo Artigas, Artway of Thinking, Yoan Capote, Cildo Meireles, Juan Andrés Milanés, Jesús Palomino, and Gu Xiong. Panamanian artists included: Brooke Alfaro, Gustavo Araujo, and Humberto Veléz.

7. Gerardo Mosquera and Adrienne Samos, "Art with the City," in *ciudadMULTIPLEcity: Arte Panamá 2003* (Amsterdam: KIT Publishers, 2004), 31.

8. Ibid., 34.

9. Gerardo Mosquera and Adrienne Samos, "Riding on a Wild One," zingmagazine, http://www.zingmagazine.com/issue19/mosquera.html.

10. Jesús Palomino, email to the author, February 17, 2009.

11. Adrienne Samos, email to the author, March 26, 2009.

12. Bennett Simpson, "Multiple City: Arte Panama 2003," *Third Text* 17, No. 3 (Sept. 2003): 293.

13. Adrienne Samos, "Vendors and Squatters, Jesús Palomino," in *ciudadMULTIPLEcity: Arte Panamá 2003*, ed. Gerardo Mosquera and Adrienne Samos (Amsterdam: KIT Publishers, 2004), 141.

14. Jesús Palomino, email to the author, February 17, 2009.

15. Craig Garrett, "Multiple City: Panamá 2003, Fundación Arte Panamá," *Art Nexus* 2, No. 49 (August 2003): 94.

16. Ingrid Commandeur, "Interview with Fulya Erdemci," Metropolis M, http://www.metropolism.org/features/fulya-erdemci-new-director-of-sk/.

17. Barbara Steiner, "Radical Democracy, Acknowledging the Complexities and Contingencies," SUPERFLEX, http://www.superflex.net/text/articles/acknowledging.shtml.

a sense of agency and empowerment among the participants that they may not otherwise put into practice—that is fundamental to collaboration. The exhibitions, and works of art within, develop situations for the expression of multiple subject positions, and it is through these kinds of exchanges that the possibility for change is enacted, with careful attention paid to the aesthetic potential of the communicative act. Above all, these projects come to function as critical sites of debate and contestation, a form of productive interaction that invariably metabolizes the different viewpoints of those involved in order to produce other viewpoints to be mulled over and debated. Such processes are ultimately dialectical in nature, productive in their sustained oppositionality and interconnectedness.

The different subject positions encounter one another and catalyze (re)vision through such interactions as a result of their proximities, both physically and intellectually. It is no wonder then that many of these projects have been hailed for their democratic nature, through the visualization and vocalization of the *polis*, but I would take this idea even further. These projects are not merely embodiments of democratic ideals, but are part of a larger project identified by French philosophers Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe as "radical democracy."[1] This is not the complacent form of democratic participation that largely defines many political systems today, but the creation of an "agonistic public sphere."[2] At this point, the notion of representation within the arts becomes infused with a sense of political representation. Debate and contestation are the cornerstones of a healthy political sphere, and I hold the same for works of art that attempt to address issues that also blend into the realms of the social sciences and beyond. This extends their potential value far beyond the rectification of some perceived societal ailment. Socially engaged, collaborative public art projects, in my opinion, should not be subjugated to some ameliorative function or criterion, as this would greatly reduce the complex nature of such practices and the issues that are their raw materials. While many of these projects certainly contain some ideological bent (which is unavoidable, a facet of authorship), there is also a concerted effort to represent the true, multivalent nature of such issues. Art, after all, is more concerned with raising questions than providing concrete answers.

Taking these various observations into consideration, I have selected a recent exhibition of socially engaged, public art to use as a case study. To this end, the exhibition *ciudadMULTIPLEcity* in Panama City, Panama, will provide a keenly provocative set of parameters, contexts and situations for this analysis of recent developments within the artistic field. The analysis of *ciudadMULTIPLEcity* will sift through the various layers of production: the exhibition itself is like a Russian Matryoshka doll, embodying multiple scales and contexts within contexts, each drawing "upon the complex discourse of the relationship between artist and place, re-imagining place as a situation, a set of circumstances, geographical location, historical narrative, group of people or social agenda."[3] But still many questions continue to plague this realm of activity, specifically as to the actual social value and lasting effects of such projects. It is my hope that through the intimate engagement of the co-curators, artists and works of art in *ciudadMULTIPLEcity* that some of these questions will be further illuminated in the following pages.

A Bird's Eye Overview

In the spring of 2003, Panama City, Panama, was transformed into an exhibition platform, providing a dynamic and indeterminate context for the realization of the public art exhibition *ciudadMULTIPLEcity*. Exploding throughout the city, emerging out of unpredictable moments and unconventional spaces, only to recede back into the forest of signs from which they came, the 12 projects of *ciudadMULTIPLEcity* were experiments in radical urban art practices.[4] As such, this exhibition of socially engaged, collaborative public art was not concerned with the ability of art to adorn or beautify spaces of the city, nor to offer any corrective measure to the inequalities of societal life that are rampant in a global financial center like Panama City. The planning, design and implementation of the exhibition was thus "definitely against a passive, 'happy' exhibition, so to speak, and all for agitation and confrontation, in order to expose different underlying social, political, ethical, symbolic, economic and psychological realities at work in this city."[5] The exhibition took on additional significance as it gained support from the local government as part of their yearlong centennial celebration. This fact further imbued the overall project with a sense of pride for the inhabitants of the city, connecting local cultural forms and practices with an international art world and audience, delineating the city as a significant stopover for itinerant art world practitioners.

The exhibition design of *ciudadMULTIPLEcity* intertwined aspects of the scattered-site international exhibition, research-based project program, and residency model. A total of 13 artists were invited to participate in the exhibition: 10 international artists from various parts of the world, and 3 artists from Panama.[6] As a relatively open-ended and pervasive exhibition design, it was exactly the multiple nature of the city—its many identities, desires, dreams, expectations, and failures—that fueled the development of each project, and provided the raw (im)materiality of the various artistic projects. Thus, it should not be surprising that one of the primary, guiding principles of the exhibition was the idea of the city as a complicit and integral "living protagonist of works of art that would in turn act upon it."[7] This is a very exciting proposition in that it moves beyond the rigidity of period shows, or loosely thematic exhibitions. It presents the exhibition structure as one of possibilities, particularly in its flexibility and open-endedness. Yet, such a proposition is not without its own parameters and limitations. In fact, working in the public realm presents entirely different sets of problems and logistical conundrums that are, in a way, the very essence of such an undertaking. To work in public space is also to probe and question the very "publicness" of that space.

Yet, if the city is a "living protagonist," a creative agent in the development of works of art, then what exactly is the working relationship between the city, curators, artists and works of art? How does this interactivity play out over the course of the exhibition? In varying degrees, it seems that these relationships are dialectical in nature. Many of the works in the show were developed over time—with interests geared more towards the process of creation rather than some final product—just as any conception of the city is always a work in progress, always incomplete. In their catalogue essay for the exhibition, curators Gerardo Mosquera and Adrienne Samos suggested this dialectical relationship between the artworks and the city, as always folding back upon itself, a ceaseless cycle of influence and interpenetration:

> the works of ciudadMULTIPLEcity were directed to move in a circle: from the city toward the art and from art toward the city. Some works invited participation, others not, but both the works themselves as well as the artists' working methods generated multiple dialogues with the metropolis, its people and imaginaries.[8]

This type of working relationship is one of constant flux. With each turn of the circle new perspectives are revealed, information is metabolized. This dialectical process is the creative foundation of the works that attempt to exist within, act upon, and make visible those aspects of the urban environment that remain in constant states of change. This dialecticism "makes art much more 'vulnerable' to the ways it is understood by the different audiences."[9] I am especially attracted to this idea of the vulnerability of art, as it conveys a sense of the porosity of the artistic process as well as the instability of the artistic message: it is always, and quite purposefully, open to interpretation. Now, in order to further ground this analysis in the actual working processes of the curators, artists and their collaborators, I will turn to consider an example of a project from the exhibition: the sculptural street installations of Jesús Palomino, entitled *Vendors and Squatters*.

Art/Life in the Streets

The street installations by Spanish artist Jesús Palomino explore social boundaries within Panama City. Palomino's constructions engaged issues of class, race, and marginality, along with their implicit social tensions—or power struggles—as they play out daily in various spaces throughout the city. Collectively, these installations are titled *Vendors and Squatters*, 2003, an overt reference to the informal markets and improvised living quarters of many of the city's inhabitants. Upon arrival to Panama City, Palomino attests to the fact that he was "deeply impressed by the street markets and the makeshift informal structures built by the vendors themselves," and thus his initial proposal for *ciudadMULTIPLEcity* "was to place a fictional market place on the streets of Panama City."[10] Working closely with co-curator Gerardo Mosquera, Palomino eventually decided to fabricate a number of impromptu shelters/vendor stalls to be sited in strategically contentious or provocative locations throughout the city. As a result, these freestanding, improvisational structures were not protected by a sense of security in numbers and were themselves under the daily threat of being dismantled or vandalized. In fact, a number of these structures were removed prematurely before the full run of the exhibition.[11] In an interesting reversal, it was the upper echelon of society that perpetuated such threats, perceiving these structures as less than desirable incursions into

their neatly manicured neighborhoods and luxury commercial centers.

The lives of many of Panama City's informal market vendors and squatter communities are defined by their very precariousness. With reference to their actual living conditions, then, it seems quite suggestive that the spaces of their livelihood are also crafted from precarious, improvised materials. As such, the structure of the shanty takes on a largely symbolic meaning, itself the visual expression of the lives of those who reside and work there, an embodiment of their uneasy position within societal life. Art critic and curator Bennett Simpson stresses the intentional materiality of Palomino's structures, extending the aesthetic dimension of the work towards critique:

> Palomino built a series of precarious, impromptu structures and sited them in parking lots, on the backs of apartment buildings and along avenues downtown. Fabricated from scrap materials, painted bright shades of blue or red, the structures resembled abandoned fruit stands or sun shelters. Like many of the works in the exhibition, the mock-shanties called attention to something official Panama may choose to ignore…[12]

What emerges from this focus on materiality is the idea that the city, again, plays a central role in the creation of the works. In this case, the city quite literally lends itself to the fabrication of the installations by way of its own accumulation of debris. It is fundamental to the conceptual nature of the project that the very same materials and fabrication methods were used to create these structures. Here, there is a convergence of social consciousness and aesthetics. It is not merely important that Palomino used similar types of materials, but also the way in which he employed them with careful attention to the aesthetics of informal architecture and necessity.

The provocation of these structures in Panama City, however—situated in very specific public spaces—contrasted greatly with the more commonly indifferent and/or contemplative responses to these works within gallery walls. This reveals "the extent to which such 'neutral' spaces sap the critical and social implications of art."[13] The reactions and responses that *Vendors and Squatters* received were anything but benign, and they came from multiple angles and with varying levels of ferocity. While Palomino himself was not present for the entire duration of the project, and subsequently only learned of the controversy surrounding his work through second hand sources, he admitted that he had not foreseen the kind of heated debate that emerged as a result of his work, on the streets of the city and in the media.[14] So why did this work cause such a commotion? What were the stakes of the debate? Who did it affect most directly, and how? The art critic Craig Garrett, writing for the journal *Art Nexus*, throws the controversy into relief:

> removed from their gallery context, these delicate structures of paper, plastic sheeting and other ephemeral materials hit upon one of the unique features of Panama City: the sharp divide between property owners—the main beneficiaries of the nation's trade-based open market economy—and the disenfranchised families who struggle to scrape together a living in virtually the same physical space.[15]

It is the very nature of squatting and informal economic ventures to inhabit spaces within the city that are abandoned, interstitial or that have otherwise fallen into disuse. Despite being illegal practices, the enforcement of anti-squatting and sidewalk vending laws is often sporadic and inconsistent, eventually allowing many of such endeavors to become semi-permanent. More often than not, the enforcement of these regulations is carried out only when these structures cross some socioeconomic line, and this has everything to do with visibility and proximity. As long as these individuals stay out of sight and out of certain neighborhoods, they are tolerated (even if begrudgingly).

For *ciudadMULTIPLEcity*, Palomino and his team of workers—local artists, urban theorists from the University, a local carpenter by the name of Victor —performed the work of vendors and squatters, but in a very limited way. Nevertheless, through this performativity, Palomino's livelihood (that is, his artistic career, trajectory and reputation) became interwoven with those of the individuals whose practices he was referencing. In a symbolic fashion, Palomino was also scraping together the means necessary for his own survival. Yet, the stakes were hardly the same: in the collaborative process, the artist retains a privileged position—a sense of autonomy—while simultaneously submitting this autonomy to the vulnerability of multiple sources of input. Palomino constructed a situation and then walked away, allowing the work to adapt to and be adapted by others. It is also important to note that Palomino was permitted to place these structures in their various contexts once an agreement had been reached with the site owners, and, more importantly, because they were (just) works of art. But this was the great sleight-of-hand performed by Palomino, after all, whereby art transforms reality, becomes more real than life itself by inciting actions and

debates that otherwise remain present but unarticulated.

Conclusion

As I stated previously, it is illuminating to consider these projects as instances within a much larger framework, an ongoing project that relates something of Laclau and Mouffe's theory of "radical democracy." In this respect I wholeheartedly agree with a statement made by internationally renowned curator of contemporary art Fulya Erdemci, who said: "For me, the *raison d'être* of any art project in public space is to create a contrast, unfold a conflict and even add more conflict to make it visible."[16] This sentiment resonates deeply with the concept of "radical democracy" as outlined by Mouffe and Laclau. Art critic and curator Barbara Steiner relays how:

> "Radical democracy" demands "the creation of new subject-positions that would allow the common articulation, for example, of anti-racism, anti-sexism, and anti-capitalism. These struggles do not simultaneously converge. In order to establish democratic equivalences, a new "common sense" is necessary… For it is not a matter of establishing a mere alliance between given interests, but of actually modifying the very identity of these forces."[17]

The processes of identification that result from the engagement of sociopolitical issues shape the different constituencies or loosely defined communities of people, but these are never definite or complete formations. Representation is always coming-into-being and simultaneously slipping away, emerging and receding, oscillating between visibility and invisibility. Furthermore, from an aesthetic standpoint, perhaps one way to think of the successfulness of such projects is the formulating of the project's mode of address, of its communicability. This has everything to do with the uncanny ability of curators and artists to develop systems of communication, of dialogue and debate between various groups of people that perhaps may not otherwise readily engage one another despite the fact that they occupy the same spaces. More often than not, it seems to me, these groups are unrecognized compatriots in the daily social lives and urban fabric of the cities in which they live. The very power of these projects, then, rests in their ability to bring into focus such processes of recognition.

These processes develop both self-knowledge as well as knowledge of the "other." As this functions at the individual level, it seems safe to say that the same could be applied to collective bodies and even to society itself. It is well recognized that crises precipitate change, and these works of art create situations wherein moments of crisis linger and provoke. This process inflects both the knowledge of the self and the other, and being able to see in this new light already constitutes a significant change. The potential for growth is also the potential to grow together, as well as to grow apart, and the directionality of such processes are largely influenced by the quality and character of the interactive experience created by artists and curators in collaboration with specific constituencies or publics. Finally, the very possibility of making the invisible visible, of excavating the social tensions and power dynamics of local and global society—*in situ*—will only ever further expand our knowledge of ourselves, of how we live and why things exist as they do. Equipped with such knowledge, we can begin to consider other alternatives, other ways of existing that throws off the shell of complacency and seeks a more informed way of life.